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A HALF-CENTURY CATACLYSM

The Vietnam War was a civil war that took on regional and ultimately global significance as perhaps the central event of the Cold War. The prolonged struggle for the future of Vietnam would draw in many of the world's great powers.

THE WAR'S IMPACT

The Vietnam War's impact on modern history cannot be understated. It ended centuries of European imperialism in Southeast Asia and provided a model for anti-colonial insurgencies across the world. It created a unified, independent Vietnam for nearly the first time in history, but it also troubled postcolonial regimes in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. The war additionally marked the beginning of Chinese preeminence on the Asian continent and perhaps beyond.

The Vietnam War was a seminal event in American history as well. It opened a rift between America and what had been its closest European allies, particularly France, West Germany, and Britain, and it damaged American prestige all over the globe. Within the United States, it sparked some of the most divisive social strife since the Civil War.

In human terms, the war exacted a staggering price. Around 1 million communist soldiers lost their lives in the two-decade fight to unify the country. A quarter of a million South Vietnamese soldiers were killed, and

more than five times that many were wounded. Nearly 100,000 foreign combatants were killed in Vietnam as well. The vast majority—some 58,000—were Americans. Hundreds of thousands more would return to their countries wounded or maimed. And while a full accounting will never be possible, at least 1 million Vietnamese civilians—and perhaps more than twice that—perished in the conflict.

Half a century later, the war continues to claim new victims. The Vietnamese government has estimated that 42,000 people have been killed by unexploded ordnance since the end of the war, nearly half of those children. Potentially hundreds of thousands are still suffering from the long-term health and environmental consequences of toxic chemical defoliants used in the conflict.

Countless millions had their lives profoundly altered by the war's consequences, and many still bear its psychological scars. Nearly 800,000 Vietnamese fled their homeland immediately after the war, and millions

more were internally displaced within a devastated country. As many as 500,000 were imprisoned, some even tortured, in Vietnamese reeducation camps. An entire generation grew up in Southeast Asia as witnesses to the horrors of war. Its memory haunts the American mindset too, with a legacy of political division that still echoes today.

FAMOUS FIGURES

Some of the war's important stories are of people who became icons of their era, thrust onto the grand stage of history. An example is Hồ Chí Minh, an unassuming, itinerant Vietnamese schoolteacher who fused anti-imperialist nationalism with modern communism and founded an independence movement of such potency that he became a patriotic icon for millions of Vietnamese, even those who opposed him.

Then there was Lyndon Johnson, a self-made political genius from a hardscrabble background in the Texas hill country who yearned to eradicate poverty in America but instead found himself consumed by a war he never wanted to fight. Another figure was Richard Nixon, the intellectually brilliant son of a small-time southern California grocer whose Quaker upbringing gave way to an unscrupulous, paranoid militancy that poisoned his relations with friend and foe alike.

ORDINARY PEOPLE

The war is also the story of ordinary people. For instance, take Duong Van Mai, who came from a big, middle-class, anti-communist family in northern Vietnam. As war raged between the French and a communist-dominated insurgency called the Viet Minh, the Duongs were uprooted and, at times, lived a refugee existence.

Eventually, Duong Van Mai's marriage to an American offered her an ability to travel afforded to few other Vietnamese. When South Vietnam collapsed in 1975, she worked frantically to get family members out of the country. Thanks to her efforts, as many as 40 made it to the United States. But her brother in the South Vietnamese Army was incarcerated for four years in a grim reeducation camp and then prohibited from leaving the country until 1990, when he finally emigrated to France.

By then, the Duongs were scattered all over the Western world, in the US, Canada, Australia, and France, mirroring the experiences of so many other refugees. Mai became a corporate banker in America and later authored *The Sacred Willow*, a seminal book that explored the experiences of her family against the backdrop of Vietnamese history.

The story of the Vietnam War also features such people as Trương Như Tảng, the son of a wealthy Saigon rubber plantation owner who immersed himself in communism. One day in Paris, though, he met Hồ Chí Minh, and it changed the course of his life.

The nationalist leader spent several hours visiting with Tảng and other Vietnamese students, imparting a strong message of independence and unity. In South Vietnam, Tảng eventually became general for the country's Bank for Industry and Commerce. Secretly, though, he began working as an operative against the Saigon government. He became a key member of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, essentially the communist insurgency's shadow political apparatus.

When the communists triumphed in 1975, though, they appropriated most power and influence for themselves. They shunted aside many southerners like Tảng, who had worked assiduously for the cause of unifying the nation.

Tảng came to realize that his father had been right about the tyrannical nature of the communists, and he grew deeply disillusioned with the postwar socialist government. In 1978, he and several other disaffected friends procured a boat and fled the country. Tảng and his group were robbed by pirates, but they made it to Indonesia. Eventually, he settled in France, where he wrote a powerful firsthand account of his experiences, published under the title *A Vietcong Memoir*. Tảng died in 2005.

Nguyễn Hữu An spent more than three decades fighting for communism. He came from Ninh Binh province in northern Vietnam. In 1945, at age 19, he joined the Viet Minh to fight the French and win independence for his country. A natural soldier and courageous leader in combat, he steadily rose in rank over the many years of struggle in the First Indochina War.

By the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, he was a regimental commander at the age of 28. His unit captured one of the last French outposts, concluding the war's most dramatic victory for the Viet Minh. A decade later, he was a commander in the North Vietnamese Army, now fighting the "American War," as he and his compatriots referred to this stage of the conflict. He was on the front lines during the Battle of Ia Drang, the first major engagement with the Americans, in 1965, and commanded NVA formations in the bloody battles fought at Dak To in 1967 and across the border in Laos. Eight years later, his division became the first to enter Saigon when the north conquered the south.

Another story along these lines is that of Phil Salois, who was the product of one war and found himself bound to fight in another. His father was a World War II veteran who married a French bride and brought her home to Rhode Island, where Phil was born in 1948. The family moved to Los Angeles when Phil was seven.

Phil came of age in the 1960s as a somewhat sheltered child of Catholic parents. His draft notice arrived in 1969, and he joined an infantry company. During a battle on March 1, 1970, Phil came perilously close to death and made a decision that would change his life.

During the fighting, Salois said a quick prayer, asking God for safety and promising to follow God's will in exchange. He then took part in a rescue action to help other soldiers who were trapped and under fire.

Phil was decorated with the Silver Star. He made it unscathed through the rest of his tour of duty, went home, and returned to work for the insurance company. But in 1972, he read a newspaper article reporting that the Catholic Church was experiencing a shortage of priests. The article reminded him of the promise he had made to God during the ambush.

Reflecting on the incident and his salvation, he decided that God wanted him to become a priest, so he went into seminary and became ordained. Over a clerical career that spanned decades, Father Salois specialized in ministering to veterans.

VIEWING THE WAR

Did anyone really win the Vietnam War? This is a harder question to answer than it might seem. The communists, of course, succeeded in toppling the Saigon regime and uniting Vietnam under their control, but that came at an atrocious human price. Meanwhile, America suffered a humiliating Cold War defeat and was racked with traumatic domestic social upheavals, the twin legacies of which remain.

Yet in the long run, both countries have rebounded. And today, the economically reformed Vietnam is one of the world's fastest growing economies, and since 1990, it has witnessed dramatic improvement in just about every measure of human development. Once its bitterest enemy, America is today Vietnam's largest trading partner and increasingly a quasi-ally for security and influence in Southeast Asia.

As a topic, the Vietnam War is always evolving as new information surfaces and the world continues to change. Adding to the topic's potency, studying the conflict in Vietnam acquaints us with the troubling ambiguities and moral complexities of war and peace.

The story of the Vietnam War is one of a long series of dismal, difficult choices faced by capable, well-meaning, and flawed mortals—people just like us. It's a story of how even the most carefully made and best-intended decisions can still echo through history with unforeseen consequences.

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FRENCH INDOCHINA AND THE VIET MINH

On the eve of World War II, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia comprised the Indochinese Union, a colonial territory of France since the 1880s. Here, a small military force of 27,000 French troops, plus administrators, government officials, plantation owners, and their associated Vietnamese allies, were charged with keeping 18 million people under the colonial thumb, mainly through repression and economic exploitation.

REWARDS AND REPRESSION

The rewards of France's territory were significant; tea, rice, coffee, pepper, zinc, and tin were major Indochinese exports. The greatest fortunes, though, were made in rubber, essential to the new global automobile and tire industry, with Michelin operating vast plantations across Vietnam.

But the vast majority of Vietnamese people benefited little from the great wealth being expropriated from their country. Despite some French investment in education and health, only 25% of the population could read; 90% were rural and poor.

French investment in its colony was highly uneven. The Indochinese Union was subdivided into three regions: Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin. Cochinchina in the south and Tonkin in the north were resource-rich and the recipient of the most colonial investment and economic development.

The long central strip of Vietnam fell under Annam. Nominally, it was merely a French protectorate, and Bảo Đại of the Nguyễn dynasty, the last emperor of Vietnam, ruled from the old imperial capital of Hue. In practice, the French still pulled the strings. This vast area of the country received almost no French investment, remaining extremely poor and undeveloped.

Some Vietnamese people began to agitate for independence. In February of 1930, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, a democratic nationalist movement comprised mostly of urban elites, staged a mutiny within the French colonial garrison at Yen Bai. The French crushed it mercilessly, executing 13 ringleaders by guillotine.

That same month, workers on a Michelin rubber plantation went on strike to protest appalling working conditions. Similar demonstrations broke out in the center of the country. These were some of the earliest protests instigated by the nascent Communist Party of Vietnam. The French brutally suppressed them.

THE JAPANESE TAKEOVER

France's iron grip on Vietnam would be interrupted by World War II. Germany's rapid defeat of France in 1940 resulted in the creation of the collaborationist Vichy French rump state, which continued to administer France's colonial empire but now had limited means to do so. Concurrently, imperial Japan was fighting a war of conquest in China.

The Japanese bullied the new French colonial authorities to allow them basing rights in northern Vietnam. Eventually, French control over Vietnam became nominal, and the Japanese became the true masters. The

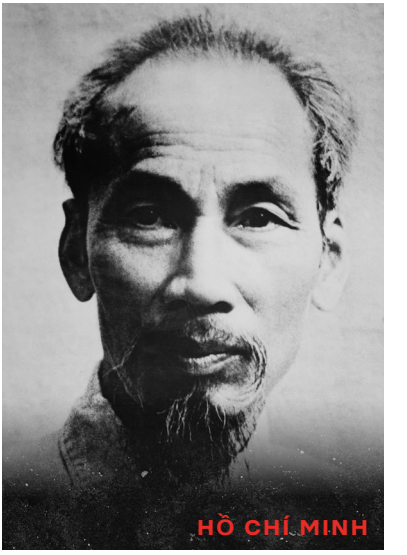
United States responded to this backdoor invasion of Indochina by freezing Japanese financial assets in America and imposing an embargo on oil and gasoline shipments to Japan. But it did not bring the Japanese to the negotiating table as the US had hoped.

Now faced with an imminent oil shortage, Japan looked urgently beyond Indochina to securing oil-rich Borneo and the Dutch East Indies, even at the cost of war with the Western powers. Events in Vietnam thus played a major role in triggering World War II in the Pacific.

THE LEAGUE FOR THE INDEPENDENCE OF VIETNAM

In March of 1945, the Japanese violently deposed the French Indochinese administration entirely. However, the takeover also emboldened Vietnamese nationalist movements. The rapid Japanese takeover had demonstrated French vulnerability.

The most prominent and active of these movements was the League for the Independence of Vietnam, a communist organization abbreviated as the Viet Minh, which began to wage a guerrilla campaign against the French and then Japanese occupiers. Their charismatic namesake and leader was Hồ Chí Minh.



By and large, the Japanese occupiers stuck to urban enclaves, allowing the Viet Minh to fill a power vacuum in the countryside. Soon it controlled vast swaths of northern and central Vietnam, mostly poorer and underdeveloped areas where French influence had been weak.

Many non-communist nationalists fought for the Viet Minh, though the organization was tightly controlled by Hồ and his party colleagues. They would eventually turn on those compatriots who would resist their agenda.

For millions of Vietnamese, however, ideology mattered little in 1945 when faced with widespread famine. The Viet Minh earned much local loyalty by stealing rice from the occupiers to distribute among villagers. Lightly armed Viet Minh guerrillas harassed the Japanese whenever they could.

Hồ looked abroad to strengthen the Viet Minh. In early 1945, he traveled to China to meet with Captain Charles Fenn of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner to the CIA.

Their successful meeting led to the deployment of an OSS operation known as the Deer Team to Vietnam in July of 1945. The Americans provided Viet Minh troops with weapons and training.

A POWER VACUUM

With the Japanese surrender to the Allies in mid-August 1945, a confused power vacuum opened in Vietnam. Having built its strength quietly for years, the Viet Minh quickly seized formal control over much of the north, including in Hanoi. In the more politically diverse south and in Saigon, the situation was more chaotic, and the Viet Minh struggled to assert dominance over other competing independence movements and occupation forces.

Nevertheless, on September 2, Hồ addressed a massive crowd of about 400,000 revelers in Hanoi and summarily declared Vietnam's independence. He dubbed the new nation as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or DRV. In his speech, he implored the victorious Allies, especially the United States, to "recognize Vietnamese freedom and independence."

For the Allies, the situation was not that simple. After the liberation of Paris in 1944, General Charles de Gaulle had taken the reins of the restored provisional French government. De Gaulle believed in restoring France as a major postwar power on the world stage. To fulfill these dual goals, he believed that France must maintain control of its colonies.

President Franklin Roosevelt of America disliked both de Gaulle and imperialism, and he hoped that the war would lead to independence for Vietnam and other colonized countries. To oversee the difficult process of decolonization, he favored the establishment of neutral and temporary international trusteeships. But these proved difficult to implement amidst the resistance of the old empires.

Treading carefully, Roosevelt consented to a temporary Chinese-British occupation of Vietnam, designed to disarm Japanese soldiers in preparation for some vague, unspecified future. This confused situation allowed de Gaulle's government to send troops and administrators into Vietnam in preparation to reestablish French control.

CHAOS

By the end of 1945, with Roosevelt's blessing, nationalist Chinese troops moved in to occupy the north, with all too many focused more on looting from locals than on disarming Japanese soldiers. Meanwhile, they began funding and arming the Vietnamese Nationalist Party in the hopes of eventually displacing the dominant Viet Minh and installing a friendly regime in Hanoi.

In the south, various religious sects, organized crime syndicates, and political parties tussled for power. At the same time, British troops helped rearm French soldiers loyal to de Gaulle's government, who then proceeded to go on a rampage against both Viet Minh insurgents and civilians, particularly in Saigon.

For their part, the Viet Minh ran a ruthless campaign of purging anyone who might challenge their supremacy. In one instance, they abducted Ngô Đình Diệm, a highly respected anti-French activist who had established a clandestine independence party known as the Association for the Restoration of the Great Vietnam.

Diệm would eventually emerge as a prominent Vietnamese nationalist. Though Hồ's men killed one of Diệm's brothers, the communists feared serious political repercussions if they killed Diệm as well.

Instead, Hồ invited Diệm to serve as minister of the interior in his fledgling government, but without giving him any real decision-making power. This kind of arrangement was a common communist political tactic.

A SHOWDOWN

Hồ and his key lieutenant, Võ Nguyên Giáp, had come to understand that the true conflict for the country would be a showdown with the French. They also knew that their small army was nowhere near armed or trained enough to take on France in the field, but Hồ hoped to buy time to acquire more weapons and international support against French imperialism.

The French were wasting little time in their plans to reclaim their recalcitrant colony. General Jacques-Phillipe Leclerc, a French hero of World War II, led the French Far East Expeditionary Corp's reoccupation of Indochina, which began in earnest in October 1945. Within months, they had reoccupied Cochinchina and southern Annam. But Leclerc recognized that French control was tenuous.

In Tonkin and northern Annam, Chinese occupation troops would not pave the way for the French to reassert control. The Viet Minh effectively remained in power there.

Nationalist Chinese forces, facing a communist revolution of their own, withdrew only in March 1946 after the French agreed to renounce their remaining colonial holdings in China. With the withdrawal of their Chinese protectors, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party and their allies were left vulnerable, and the Viet Minh hunted down and killed thousands of their members, strengthening their grip in the north.

At this crucial juncture, de Gaulle stepped down, and an elected democratic government—the Fourth Republic—was established in Paris. The new French government sent Jean Sainteny to negotiate a political settlement with the Viet Minh. In March 1946, Hồ and Sainteny finalized the Hồ-Sainteny Agreement, which had three stipulations.

First, France recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or DRV, consisting of Tonkin and portions of Annam north of the 16th parallel. The DRV could have its own treasury, army, and parliament.

Second, the DRV would remain only partially independent. French troops could be stationed on DRV soil for up to five years, and the DRV was to be part of the French Union, a new postwar organization designed to assimilate colonies into the French political structure. France would remain in direct control of Cochinchina and southern Annam.

Third, at some undetermined time, elections would be held in Cochinchina to decide if it wished to unite with the DRV. Hồ viewed the agreement as a necessary evil but the first step to an ultimately united and independent

Vietnam without widespread bloodshed. The French saw the accord as the best possible settlement to restore and legitimize their continued presence in Vietnam.

CONTINUED ISSUES

The agreement didn't last long, in part because it didn't resolve the core issues that lay at the root of the looming conflict. For instance, would Vietnam be a truly independent country, and if so, who would control it, and what would its ideology be? Would France continue as an imperial presence in Indochina?

Moreover, many conservatives within the French government opposed the agreement and the granting of any concessions to the Viet Minh. In June 1946, the high commissioner in Indochina, Georges-Thierry d'Argenlieu, a de Gaulle loyalist, unilaterally announced the creation of a supposedly Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina, dominated by pro-French forces and in direct violation of the agreement made just months before. Without a referendum, there were now two rival Vietnamese governments.

Subsequent negotiations between the French and Vietnamese throughout 1946 proved fruitless. By December 1946, negotiations broke down completely. Violent skirmishes broke out between the two sides. The First Indochina War had begun.

THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR

The Viet Minh had been preparing to fight for their independence. Võ Nguyên Giáp's army had grown to a force of more than 50,000 full-time fighters, with more recruited to the cause by the day. For the most part, they pursued a guerrilla war of sniping, ambushes, booby-trapping, and subterfuge. Though quickly pushed out of Hanoi and the northern cites by the better-equipped French forces, they soon dominated much of the countryside in the north and harassed the French as much as they could.

As the late 1940s unfolded, the conflict widened and grew bloodier. The French recognized that if the war boiled down to a choice between colonialism under the French and independence under the Viet Minh, they could never secure enough support to win in the long term.

Instead, their best option was to exploit the profound regional and ideological differences among Vietnamese nationalists and install a pro-Western and pro-capitalist regime that would be friendly to French economic, military, and strategic interests in the region. This meant building up popular support for the French presence by consummating an alliance with a respected Vietnamese leader who was not associated with the Viet Minh.

For the French, that leader was Bảo Đại. Similar to Diệm, the communists had attempted to woo him into the DRV government as a figurehead. He refused and, fearing for his life, fled to Hong Kong. Through tortuous negotiations, the French coaxed him back home. Bảo Đại would be given his own army and an actual seat of government in Saigon.

In truth, though, the French still maintained control of the country's finances and defense, meaning the continued presence of French military forces. Also, since the DRV already controlled the northern part of the country, the French could only promise Bảo Đại control of Cochinchina and parts of Annam where the Viet Minh was not preeminent.

Despite this, Bảo Đại's government did enjoy substantial support from Catholics, southern religious sects, a growing class of urban professionals, and anti-communists of varying ideals—a testament to the growing political divergence between the north and south. In this way, France's colonial war morphed into a Vietnamese civil war as Bảo Đại's troops joined the conflict against the Viet Minh, an unwelcome development for Hồ.

GLOBAL DIMENSIONS

What might have stayed a domestic civil war rapidly took on global dimensions. In 1949, Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party triumphed in the Chinese Civil War, putting the world's most populous country firmly

into the communist camp. The communist triumph in China was one of the most impactful events in modern history, especially in relation to the Cold War.

For Vietnam, it meant that Hồ now had a powerful source of outside support. China provided advisors and thousands of weapons, and the Soviet Union sent weapons and supplies, too.

For the Americans, the game had also changed. Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, similarly had little sympathy for the perpetuation of French imperialism and had hoped that Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia would become fully independent as soon as possible. But as the Cold War intensified, he was far more concerned about the spread of communism.

With the success of the Chinese Revolution, American attention now shifted to containing communism in Asia. Soon, the Americans were at war in Korea to hold the line. And in Vietnam, the Americans found themselves with two unappealing choices: French colonialism or communist nationalism.

In the end, the choice for the Americans was obvious, if not particularly uplifting or attractive. They would back the French. The Truman administration began sending military and economic aid to the hard-pressed French. By the early 1950s, the United States was paying for 80% of France's war in Vietnam, costing $1 billion per year.

3

DIEN BIEN PHU AND VIETNAM DIVIDED, 1953–1959

In November 1953, French planes began airlifting troops to Dien Bien Phu, a vital valley in northwestern Vietnam near the Laotian border. General Henri Navarre, the French commander in Indochina, planned to establish a series of fortified perimeters, known as firebases, in this critical valley. Navarre wagered that doing so would force the Viet Minh to come out and fight in the open for control of the valley. The French had been losing the guerrilla war in Vietnam's jungles and marshes, but in open battle, against the superior technology and firepower of France, the Viet Minh could be defeated. Drawing the Viet Minh into a decisive engagement was the best chance to turn the tide.

THE SITUATION

Navarre's decision to fortify Dien Bien Phu was one of the most fateful in all of military history. It initiated a desperate seven-month long campaign.

To understand the significance of Dien Bien Phu, the international context is important. In 1953, the Cold War was raging with full force nearly everywhere. The First Indochina War was just one theater of the global confrontation between communist and Western forces.

By 1953, French military forces had suffered more than 90,000 casualties, yet there was no end of the conflict in sight. The French still held the major cities and towns, but no more than about one-third of the countryside, and with each year, its grip weakened further. A year earlier, both Laos and Cambodia had been granted full independence under friendly governments, but the French remained determined to hold on in Vietnam in the hopes of installing their preferred post-independence regime there too.

That regime, though, was looking shaky. Bảo Đại was an increasingly unpopular and largely absentee ruler, with the French still holding most of the power behind the scenes in Saigon. His forces, the Vietnamese National Army, were plagued by low morale and chronic desertions. The conflict had become deeply unpopular in France, too, creating serious pressure for the government there to end it as soon as possible.

The Viet Minh was not in particularly good shape either. Food was scarce, recruitment was plummeting, and the casualties were terrible. General Võ Nguyên Giáp, the Viet Minh's sagacious military commander, later described the battle to take place at Dien Bien Phu as "the last desperate exertion of the Viet Minh army."

All this meant that by the start of 1954, neither side was under the illusion of achieving an outright victory. The Viet Minh couldn't hope to eject the superior French troops from the cities and strongholds, but the French knew the insurgency was too widespread and popular to be pacified now.

Facing a military stalemate, both sides agreed to meet in Geneva that year to negotiate a political settlement to the conflict. And both sides now sought to strengthen their position on the ground as much as possible before reaching the negotiating table. The eyes of the world, then, were focused on the situation unfolding at Dien Bien Phu.

FIREBASES AND FIGHTING

The French established a series of eight substantial firebases and one main airstrip in the valley, deploying nearly 16,000 troops to defend them. Navarre expected that he could keep his garrisons supplied by air.

This proved to be a fatal miscalculation. Giáp gathered intelligence on the disposition of French forces and painstakingly emplaced heavy guns into well-camouflaged caves or earthen dugouts, rendering them extremely hard for the French to spot or damage. Concealed antiaircraft fire could now harass French planes and impede aerial resupply with virtual impunity. Down below, it was dawning on the French that they had put their heads into a noose.

Giáp began the direct assault on Dien Bien Phu on March 13. The effectiveness of the Viet Minh's bombardment stunned the French command. Within the first 48 hours, Giáp's guns had destroyed the command posts and leveled the defenses of the two northernmost firebases, which then quickly fell to Viet Minh troops. The main airstrip was also destroyed, making French resupply possible only by paradrop.

After battering the French strongholds from on high, the Viet Minh employed bloody human wave assaults to capture them, sometimes accompanied by protracted, labor-intensive efforts to dig tunnels to get close to the perimeter wire of a base before attacking. Such tactics naturally took a heavy toll on life and morale.

Yet Giáp pressed on relentlessly, feeding in a constant supply of fresh troops. From March to May, the Viet Minh steadily surrounded and overran the bases in a series of ferocious, costly battles. As this gloomy situation played out, the French government desperately appealed to the United States, hoping for direct intervention.

AMERICA STAYS OUT

President Dwight D. Eisenhower considered several plans to save the garrison at Dien Bien Phu. However, it became increasingly apparent that the key question was not so much whether to save Dien Bien Phu but whether the United States should now assume responsibility for the war against the Viet Minh.

Like his predecessor Truman, Eisenhower viewed Southeast Asia as a vital area in the ongoing struggle to contain communism, so he gave very serious thought to intervening in Vietnam. In the end, he decided against it for several reasons.

First, there was little appetite among the American people to take on yet another ground war on the Asian continent so soon after the recently completed Korean conflict. Second, Eisenhower believed that the United States should intervene in Vietnam only as part of a coalition of non-communist nations. Perhaps most importantly, it became apparent to Eisenhower that even with an international partnership, the heaviest burden of the fighting would fall upon the United States ground forces.

The United States stood by as the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu. The last resistance petered out on May 7, 1954. The Viet Minh captured more than 11,000 prisoners, 38% of whom were wounded. At best, perhaps one-third of those prisoners survived captivity.

THE GENEVA ACCORDS

The debacle at Dien Bien Phu was not a deathblow to the French forces, who still readily maintained their military superiority in Vietnam. But it was a stunning and symbolic upset keenly felt in Paris. The very next day, negotiations began in Geneva on the future of Indochina, lasting until July 20. Representatives from France, Britain, the United States, China, the Soviet Union, the Viet Minh, and Bảo Đại's government hammered out what became known as the Geneva Accords.

First, Vietnam was to be divided, supposedly temporarily, at the 17th parallel, with a three-mile-wide demilitarized zone on either side. Hồ Chí Minh and the communists would rule in the north as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or DRV. Hanoi would be its capital.


BẢO ĐẠI

But the French-backed government of Bảo Đại would remain in power in the south as the Republic of Vietnam, with its capital in Saigon. French soldiers would remain stationed in the south.

Second, there would be a period of free movement between north and south for 300 days to allow ordinary Vietnamese, to some extent, to choose the country in which they wanted to live. Third, neither North nor South Vietnam was permitted to receive outside military reinforcements, nor could they enter into any formal military alliances.

Fourth, an international control commission consisting of Canada, Poland, and India would supervise elections in 1956 to

determine whether the Vietnamese people wished to unify under the DRV or Bảo Đại. And finally, the independence previously granted to Laos and Cambodia was affirmed.

Like any compromise, all parties left underwhelmed. The Viet Minh were particularly crestfallen. Hồ and the communists had been fighting for nothing less than a united and independent Vietnam.

Given their rapidly deteriorating position, the accords were quite generous to the French, who now had a face-saving way to exit Vietnam, as well as a rump pro-French state that would allow some of its most valuable economic interests, like the Michelin rubber plantations, to continue operating. The Americans also felt that the agreement represented a better outcome than events on the battlefield had warranted.

They also liked the idea of partition because it offered the continued hope of containing communism. Bảo Đại, however, had wanted the country unified under his government. He also felt that the French and other foreigners had no right to make any territorial decisions in relation to Vietnam. Neither his government nor the Americans actually signed the eventual accords, though they both informally acceded to it for lack of any other options.

A PERMANENT DIVISION

What began as a temporary partition quickly became a permanent division. The elections on unification never happened. As Bảo Đại and the Americans had not actually signed the accords, they felt no legal obligation to follow through with elections. They were no doubt aware that had elections taken place, the communists probably would have won.

MOVING TOWARD DIVISION ★ THE FREE-MOVEMENT PROVISION OF THE ACCORDS STRONGLY IMPLIED THAT THE NEGOTIATORS KNEW THAT VIETNAM WAS TO END UP PERMANENTLY DIVIDED. IN THIS SENSE, GENEVA SOLIDIFIED THE DIVISIONS THAT ALREADY EXISTED AMONG THE VIETNAMESE THEMSELVES AND WERE THEN REINFORCED BY THEIR FOREIGN ALLIES.

In the second half of the 1950s, after Geneva, the two Vietnams came into being. In the north, the communists established absolutist rule. Ruling as a dictator in league with a powerful retinue of close associates who sat on the party's politburo, Hồ focused on rebuilding after many years of war and transforming the country economically.

Heavy-handed land reform, agricultural collectivization, and the targeted repression of so-called class enemies led to the execution of tens of thousands. It is likely that thousands more died from disease and malnutrition. Opponents of the regime and other suitably stigmatized outcasts who survived were consigned to forced labor camps.

At the same time, the Americans and the French took supreme advantage of the movement clause in the Geneva Accords to foster a mass exodus from north to south. In the face of Viet Minh efforts to intimidate or physically prevent people from leaving the DRV, the CIA masterminded Operation Passage to Freedom, a yearlong effort to get as many people as possible to South Vietnam.

Many northerners, especially Catholics who were worried about religious persecution, were eager to escape communism. American propaganda about communist repression attempted to motivate people to leave. But most people made their exodus decision for family, economic, spiritual, or personal reasons. Just under 1 million Vietnamese, about 80% of whom were Catholic, boarded French and American ships or planes that carried them south.

The United States spent $93 million on this vast enterprise, which largely relocated the north's Catholic population into southern Vietnam. It deepened the cultural and political divide between north and south and established a strong anti-communist constituency for Bảo Đại's regime.

SOUTH VIETNAM'S STATUS

South Vietnam was now a mishmash of competing political blocs. Traditionally, the south was predominantly Buddhist, yet it now had a significant and influential Catholic minority. This minority represented much of the French-educated elite, who quickly dominated the power structures of the nascent state, fueling religious tensions.

There were also two notable religious sects, the Hòa Hảo and the Cao Đài. The Hòa Hảo was an offshoot of Buddhism prominent in the Mekong River delta. Its members had fought the Japanese, the French, and the Viet Minh, and they naturally wanted a major voice in the Saigon government.

Cao Đài was a fusion of several Eastern religions with a dash of Christianity. Their members controlled major swaths of territory north and west of Saigon. They had cooperated with the Viet Minh against the French, and they did not trust the new government in the south.

Also in play was the Bình Xuyên, a syndicate of armed criminal gangs. Their private army was nearly 40,000 strong and was almost a shadow government, controlling many of Saigon's docks, police stations, and transportation nodes.

South Vietnam also contained hundreds of thousands of ethnic Chinese, many of whom lived in a Saigon suburb called Cholon. Generally, they felt little if any loyalty to any local government. Beyond the capital, the central highlands and mountainous border areas were home to a diverse array of non-Vietnamese indigenous tribes. The tribes had endured centuries of discrimination at the hands of the Vietnamese. They therefore tended to dislike and mistrust any ethnic Vietnamese, whether communist or non-communist.

Additionally, about 10,000 Viet Minh operators had remained in the south. They were waiting and planning for the day when the DRV would try to unify Vietnam, either through political means or by force.

NGÔ ĐÌNH DIỆM STEPS FORWARD

To steer this fractious new nation forward, an adept political operator who could unite the nation was needed. Bảo Đại had neither the skill nor the support to do so. Instead, he looked for help from Ngô Đình Diệm, one of the few Vietnamese nationalists whose status even remotely approached that of Hồ Chí Minh.

In June 1954, Bảo Đại invited Diệm to serve as his prime minister, unwittingly sowing the seeds of his own undoing. Diệm inherited a government that existed more on paper than in reality. But over the next year, Diệm systematically built a new army—the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN—from the remnants of the Vietnamese National Army.

With his new forces, he suppressed opposition to his government and brought the factions to heel, while marginalizing Bảo Đại's influence. He found a useful partner in his younger brother, the zealously loyal Ngô Đình Nhu, who became his right-hand man and the head of the new South Vietnamese security forces.

In October of 1955, Diệm's power had grown sufficiently to hold a national referendum to decide whether he or Bảo Đại should be recognized as the official leader. Although Diệm probably did enjoy some level of majority support, the election was heavily rigged. Diệm supposedly emerged with 98.2% of the vote, with a total that eclipsed the number of registered voters in the country.


NGÔ ĐÌNH DIỆM

Regardless, the outcome confirmed him as the sole leader of what now became known as the Republic of Vietnam. The many political lives of Bảo Đại were finally over, and the last emperor of Vietnam would retire to France.

THE FIRST STEPS

Both Diệm and the Americans understood that the communists in the DRV had hardly given up on their intention to one day unify the country under their control. To do so, they would have to bring down Diệm's regime. The Americans had no intention of allowing that to happen.

Eisenhower concluded that Diệm was the right person around whom to build a viable, independent, strong South Vietnam capable of preventing the expansion of communism in Southeast Asia. From 1955 to 1961, the Americans funneled $1.8 billion of aid to him and transformed the ARVN into a well-equipped, modern military force.

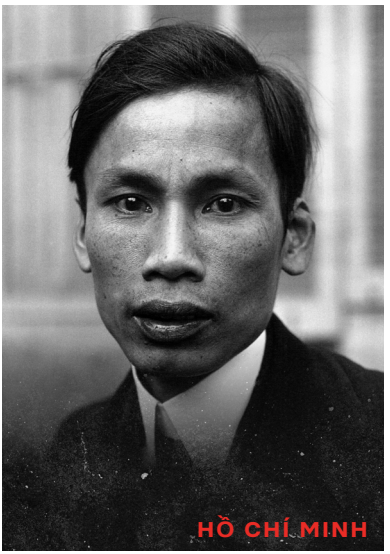
Diệm made state visits to the United States, and in 1957, he even addressed a joint session of Congress, cementing a growing partnership between the Americans and the South Vietnamese. These were the first fateful steps on the way to a growing American involvement in Vietnam, one that would eventually lead the Americans into war.

4

FIVE LEADERS WHO DEFINED THE VIETNAM WAR

By 1956, amidst a divided nation, the five leaders who would most shape the struggle for the future of Vietnam had come into view. In North Vietnam, a plan for a united communist nation was being devised by Hồ Chí Minh and his lieutenant Lê Duẩn. In South Vietnam, the anti-communist elite and the US had thrown their hopes behind the ardent and talented—though ultimately authoritarian—Ngô Đình Diệm. And across the Pacific, politicians on the rise—Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon—would eventually find themselves driving America's role in Southeast Asia. This lecture focuses on what drove these men in the key events that were to follow.

HỒ CHÍ MINH



No one person more directly symbolizes the conflict in Vietnam than Hồ Chí Minh, the father of Vietnamese communist nationalism. The name by which we know him was the last he settled on after embracing at least 70 other aliases over the course of his life. Hồ was born as Nguyễn Sinh Cung in 1890 in the north-central part of Vietnam, the son of a mandarin magistrate and nationalist who was demoted for abuse of power.

Unlike most Vietnamese, Hồ received a formal French education and attended an elite high school in Hue, the imperial capital. Hồ inherited a passion for Vietnamese nationalism from his father, but despite later claims by communist propagandists that Hồ was involved in revolutionary anti-colonial activities from an early age, there is little evidence to support this. In fact, he unsuccessfully applied in 1911 to the French Colonial Administrative School, a gateway to the circles of elitist Vietnamese who served the French imperial presence. The demise of his father's career, though, had limited Hồ's opportunities in education and employment, to the point where he decided to leave the country.

For several years, Hồ traveled the world as a kitchen helper aboard a French ship. Hồ had a knack for languages, and this must have enriched his travels. He could speak Vietnamese, French, English, Russian, and three Chinese dialects.

Hồ lived in France from 1919 to 1923, during which time he befriended numerous French socialists and communists, and these relationships significantly shaped his worldview. He was by this point already an ardent anti-colonialist who wanted immediate independence for Vietnam, but during his time in France, he came to believe that Marxism-Leninism and popular revolution represented the best way to rid the world of imperialism.

One experience hardened these convictions. When the Allied leaders met at Versailles after World War I to decide on a postwar settlement, Hồ and other Vietnamese nationalists appealed for independence on the basis of self-determination, one of the Allies' stated war aims. But the French leaders were in no mood to grant Vietnam its independence. Neither they nor any of the other Allied statesmen even replied to the request.

Hồ would spend most of the next two decades shuttling back and forth between China and the Soviet Union, working for the Communist International, or Comintern, an organization that strived to foment global revolution in fulfillment of Marx's vision. In 1930, he founded the Communist Party of Vietnam in Hong Kong. As a professional revolutionary, Hồ logged plenty of prison time. British colonial authorities in Hong Kong jailed him, as did the Nationalist Chinese government.

In the mid-1930s, he studied and taught at the Lenin Institute in Moscow, managing to survive Josef Stalin's terrifying purges. By the late 1930s, he moved to Chongqing, China, serving as the senior Comintern agent in charge of Asian affairs. After French colonial forces arrested or killed most of the Vietnamese Communist Party's leadership in 1941, Hồ returned to his homeland to lead the party once more and to form a combined political-military front to fight for independence: the Viet Minh.

As leader of the Vietnamese Communist Party, he cultivated the pleasant avuncular image as Uncle Hồ, a humble, plain-spoken man and friendly patriot. Yet behind the scenes, Hồ wouldn't shy away from tough, even brutal decisions to ensure that his movement would dominate postwar Vietnam.

LÊ DUẨN

Hồ Chí Minh attracted fiercely loyal and talented disciples to the movement. None, though, would match the force of will and tenacity of Lê Duẩn, whose dramatic impact on the Vietnam War was largely unappreciated by most scholars until only very recently.

Seventeen years younger than Ho, Lê Duẩn was born in Quang Tri, the northernmost province of what would someday become South Vietnam. He had access to a French colonial education, and he developed excellent reading and writing skills, which he parlayed into a job as a clerk for the Vietnam Railway Company.

His duties brought him into contact with communist nationalists who wanted to organize the railroad workers against the French authorities. With strong pro-independence views, in 1930, he joined the Communist Party of Vietnam and devoted his life to revolutionary activism. The next year, French agents arrested and imprisoned him. Lê Duẩn languished in captivity for five years. The privation and harshness of prison only radicalized him more.

When a socialist government in Paris granted amnesty to Lê Duẩn and about 1,500 other prisoners in 1936, the unabashed young man continued with his revolutionary activities. Predictably, the French got him again, and from 1940 to 1945, he was in the remote island prison of Con Son. By the time he got out, he had been incarcerated for nearly a third of his life. He burned with revolutionary fervor.

Lê Duẩn thrived at forging individual alliances with other key communists and eviscerating his party rivals. Like Hồ, he was smart, ferociously committed to the cause, and ruthless in his will to see it succeed. He spent much of the First Indochina War in the Mekong River region of the south, organizing guerrilla forces and spreading propaganda against the French and their allies.

After partition in 1954, Lê Duẩn migrated back and forth between the north and south, managing communist guerrilla groups. In the north, he played an important role in solidifying the regime's control of the countryside, implementing agricultural collectivism.

While Hồ held legendary status among ordinary Vietnamese and served as the popular figurehead of the communist movement, it was Lê Duẩn, more than any other individual, who actually directed the eventual war against South Vietnam and the United States and saw it through to final victory. Over time, Lê Duẩn steadily usurped the aging Hồ's power and spearheaded more aggressive policies.

NGÔ ĐÌNH DIỆM

Standing opposed to these two communist nationalist titans, yet no less committed to his opposing vision for Vietnamese independence, was Ngô Đình Diệm, the son of a prominent mandarin nationalist who traced a family lineage back to Vietnam's first king. Born in 1901, Diệm was one of nine siblings and reared in an austere, disciplined environment of intellectual learning and backbreaking agricultural labor.

Eventually, he became a civil servant in the French colonial administration and rose through the ranks to become a district chief and then a provincial chief. He earned an outstanding reputation for fairness, wisdom, and honesty.

Diệm's pro-independence views and ardent nationalism practically guaranteed that he would eventually clash with the French. The showdown came in 1933, after Diệm became interior minister in Bảo Đại's French-controlled government in the Annam protectorate and was subsequently named head of a commission on potential administrative reforms. When Bảo Đại and his French masters spurned the commission's

recommendations, including the introduction of a Vietnamese legislature, he resigned in disgust and returned to the life of a private citizen, but he was still working secretly to promote Vietnamese nationalism.

Diệm's Catholicism was incompatible with communism, which he saw as dehumanizing. But with Hồ's Viet Minh dominant, building a coalition for non-communist independence was challenging. During World War II, Diệm flirted with the Japanese occupiers for a time before realizing that they had no intention of granting independence to his country.

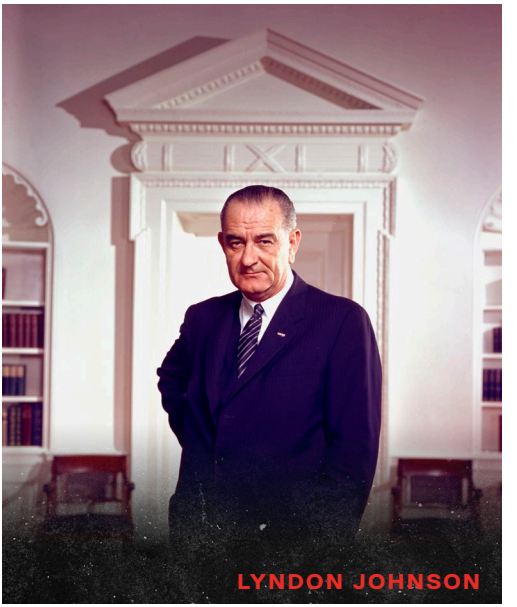
After the war, Hồ respected Diệm enough as a fellow patriot to offer him a cabinet-level position in his newly declared government, but Diệm knew he would not have any real power under their thumb. Worse still, he and the communists could not agree on what sort of independent Vietnam they wanted, and he mistrusted the communists because they had killed one of his brothers. Fearing he would share the same eventual fate, Diệm fled the country for most of the First Indochina War, mostly living at a seminary in the United States.

Diệm finally returned to his country in 1954 to accept Bảo Đại's offer to become prime minister of what soon became South Vietnam. For Vietnam, he hoped to establish a so-called third way between capitalism and communism, and, with his brother Ngô Đình Nhu, developed an ideology they called personalism: a bizarre mixture of Catholic dogma, Confucianism, and the theories of French philosopher Emmanuel Mournier that was never particularly coherent. Regardless, it eventually became the basis of the Ngô brothers' Personalist Labor Revolution Party, which they formed to consolidate non-communist political power in the south.

LYNDON JOHNSON

The two American statesmen who had the greatest impact on the Vietnam War were Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. They were Senate majority leader and vice president respectively in 1956, but both were destined to occupy the White House, and both had stints in the military.

Johnson had a hardscrabble upbringing in the Texas hill country. His father, Samuel, was a prominent citizen who served multiple terms as a Democrat in the state legislature. But a disastrous decision to invest in a



failed cotton farming venture brought his wife and five children to the edge of financial destitution.

These hard times were at their worst just as Lyndon entered his teenage years, and he never forgot the stinging humiliation and desperation of poverty. As the eldest child, he developed an outsized, larger-than-life personality and burned with ambition to make something of himself.

As a Texas Democrat in the US Senate, Johnson assumed the thankless role of majority leader, turning it into an incredibly powerful position. He came to dominate the Senate during the 1950s, displaying a knack for passing legislation.

He was a master of the backroom deal. He was a tall and gangly man, with big hands, big ears, and a folksy and intimate personal manner. He liked to grab colleagues by their lapels and talk nose to nose with them.

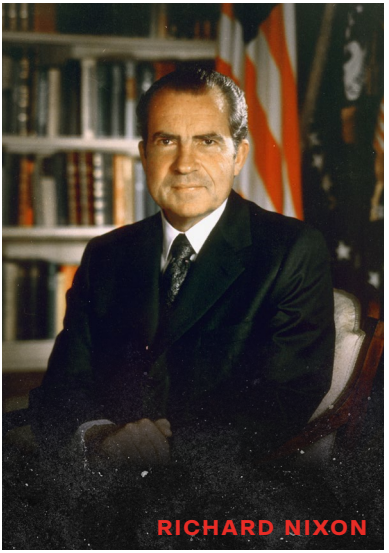
Johnson cared about more than just his own power, but his priorities and expertise were in domestic policy rather than foreign affairs. His true passion was addressing racial and economic injustice—advancing civil rights and waging a war on poverty. By contrast, the simmering troubles in Vietnam held relatively little interest for this ambitious politician, who yearned to become president and build a great society.

Johnson would get his wish soon enough. But unfortunately for him, Vietnam would define his presidency every bit as much as, or even more than, civil rights or the great society.

RICHARD NIXON

Like Johnson, Richard Nixon was a self-made man who endured a challenging upbringing and more than his share of tough economic times. Nixon grew up in southern California. His mother was a devout Quaker, and his father was a small-business owner who never quite seemed to have the acumen and luck to make his enterprises work.

Nixon ran for Congress in 1946. Entering the House of Representatives as a freshman Republican, Nixon established a reputation as an anti-communist Cold Warrior. Most notably, he served as an influential member on the House Un-American Activities Committee that accused Alger Hiss, a prominent diplomat, of being a Soviet spy.


RICHARD NIXON

By the end of the 1940s, Nixon had already emerged as an up-and-coming player in the Republican Party. He ran for a California Senate seat in 1950 and infamously implied that his liberal Democrat opponent, Helen Gahagan Douglas, was a communist sympathizer. Nixon won in a landslide.

In the Senate, he became a wary ally of Joseph McCarthy, sympathetic to the demagogue's opposition to communism but opposed to his reckless allegations. Nixon represented a new kind

of postwar Republican: pro-civil rights, fiscally conservative, anti-communist, pro-defense, and at ease with some New Deal programs like Social Security.

Dwight Eisenhower chose Nixon as his running mate during his campaign for president, and the young Californian served two terms as vice president in the 1950s. Here, Nixon developed a penchant for his true passion—foreign and international affairs.

Nixon was given a significant role in Eisenhower's administration, with higher-profile assignments than was traditional. He traveled the globe extensively and attained a knowledge of international politics that few others could equal. Notably, in 1953, Nixon toured eastern Asia, visiting many of the hotspots of the region, such as Taiwan and South Korea as well as both Hanoi and Saigon.

Thereafter, Nixon became increasingly interested in America's role in the world. By the late 1950s, the globe-trotting vice president was becoming a familiar face among world leaders, and behind the scenes had begun to influence US foreign policy toward a more confrontational stance.

Watching events unfold in Southeast Asia, he became increasingly convinced that the survival of South Vietnam was critical to prevent totalitarian communism from sweeping through the entire region, even if that meant significant commitments of American forces. His theory would be tested soon enough.

5

THE RISE OF THE VIET CONG, 1959–1962

In January of 1959, Hồ Chí Minh and the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the highest political authority in North Vietnam, gathered for a plenum in Hanoi. The main issue on the agenda was the question of what to do about the continued partition of Vietnam.

THE SITUATION IN 1959

The promised election on reunification had not occurred, and instead Ngô Đình Diệm had consolidated his power over South Vietnam. He was receiving substantial military and economic aid from the United States. His regime was doing an effective job of harassing, suppressing, and destroying the communist Viet Minh guerrillas who had stayed behind in the hopes of sparking a popular revolution that would bring the south into the northern fold.

The question the Central Committee now faced was whether to seriously commit themselves to unifying the country by force. This would mean mobilizing their own population for war and funneling weapons, training, money, and other assistance to the insurgents.

As the plenum unfolded, the arguments for and against war raged back and forth. Within the Central Committee and its inner leadership, known as the politburo, two rival factions had emerged. On the one hand, there were the interventionists, or south-first faction, who argued that it was the party's responsibility to take direct action. They pushed for an all-out military struggle to unify Vietnam by force. The most prominent and persuasive interventionist was Lê Duẩn.

Opposing the interventionists was the north-first faction, who wanted to prioritize domestic policy and the economic development of North Vietnam, which had been deeply scarred by a decade of conflict with the French. They believed that a flourishing communist state in the north would win converts in the south.

For the first few years after partition, the north-first faction was the more powerful of the two. Its leader was Trường Chinh, then serving as general secretary of the party, and both Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp were counted among its supporters.

By the 1959 meeting, Lê Duẩn and the south-first faction were in the ascendency. Hồ went along with the new pro-war majority but favored only a limited, grassroots guerrilla war. He ordered communist operatives to focus on building insurgent organizations at the village level and fight only small battles. The goal was to gradually weaken Diệm's government until international opinion and support might create favorable conditions for the north to finish them off and unite Vietnam.

A CHANGING PICTURE

Hồ asked the Soviets and the Chinese to support their southern push. Nikita Khrushchev's government refused to help him. By contrast, Mao Zedong and the Chinese fully approved of war and promised to provide Hồ with $5 million worth of weapons and supplies.

Hồ envisioned a gradual, long-term conflict that would lead to victory years in the future, perhaps even after he was gone. He could not know that once unleashed, the forces of war were going to accelerate beyond his control. Nonetheless, the decision to embrace a violent path to reunification further empowered the south-first faction.

The next year, Lê Duẩn became secretary-general of the party—a likely disappointment for Hồ, who would have preferred a moderate in the post. Now nearly 70, though, Hồ could no longer command the party as he once had. Lê Duẩn and his allies were now firmly in the driver's seat.

THE NLF

In December 1960, the communists established the National Liberation Front, or NLF, a formal political face for the growing insurgency they were sponsoring in South Vietnam. The military arm of the NLF became known as the Liberation Army of South Vietnam, or LASV. President Diệm dubbed them Viet Cong, or VC, a term that basically meant "Vietnamese communist."

The NLF portrayed itself as a broad coalition of Vietnamese nationalists, including non-communists, who had joined forces with their communist countrymen to rid Vietnam of an imperialist puppet regime. To be sure, the NLF did include many operatives, especially in the countryside, who simply disliked the Saigon government and knew or cared little about communist ideology. But the reality was that the NLF was a communist organization. And though led by prominent southern communists, the NLF ultimately took its orders from Hanoi, and it was sustained by weapons and other supplies covertly filtered to them from north to south.

The NLF was a front controlled by uncompromising communists like Lê Duẩn, and they had zero tolerance for any other political opposition. In time, NLF operatives began assassinating Saigon government officials, ambushing government troops, and establishing shadow governments in rural villages.

CIVIL AND PROXY WARS

On the military side, there were two principal kinds of Viet Cong guerrillas: local force and main force. Local force insurgents functioned as part-time militia, usually in their own home villages. They focused on recruiting, gathering intelligence, and political agitation, along with sniping and ambushes against government officials and troops.

Main force Viet Cong were better-trained, better-armed, full-time soldiers who operated beyond their own homes. As the war expanded, main force battalions became a formidable military force.

As Viet Cong attacks and sabotage started to create serious headaches for Diệm, fighting also raged in neighboring Laos between monarchists, non-communist rightists, and communist guerrillas known as the Pathet Lao. The North Vietnamese and the Soviets were providing aid to the Pathet Lao, and the Americans supported both of the non-communist groups at various times.

This proxy war in Laos could well have led to a direct confrontation between the superpowers. But in 1961, President John Kennedy pivoted away from American intervention in Laos, as did Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev. At an international conference in Geneva involving 14 countries, the Americans and Soviets brokered a peace settlement that established a shaky coalition government in Laos. The foreign powers pledged neutrality and agreed to cease all military involvement.

The civil war boiled on, unabated, and the Pathet Lao established a firm hold on the eastern regions of the country that bordered Vietnam. Moreover, the North Vietnamese never withdrew their troops. Instead, they joined forces with the Pathet Lao and cultivated increasingly sophisticated bases and routes to funnel weapons, food, and other supplies to the Viet Cong. This was the logistical network that generally became known as the Hồ Chì Minh Trail.

The Americans waged a clandestine, CIA-led war of their own, joining forces with local tribes in hopes of sabotaging communist influence. Eventually, the Americans would conduct a major air campaign and run special operations raids into Laos as well. The Laotian settlement may have averted a wider war, but at the terrible price of ceding a vital sphere of influence to the North Vietnamese, which would plague the American war effort in Vietnam.

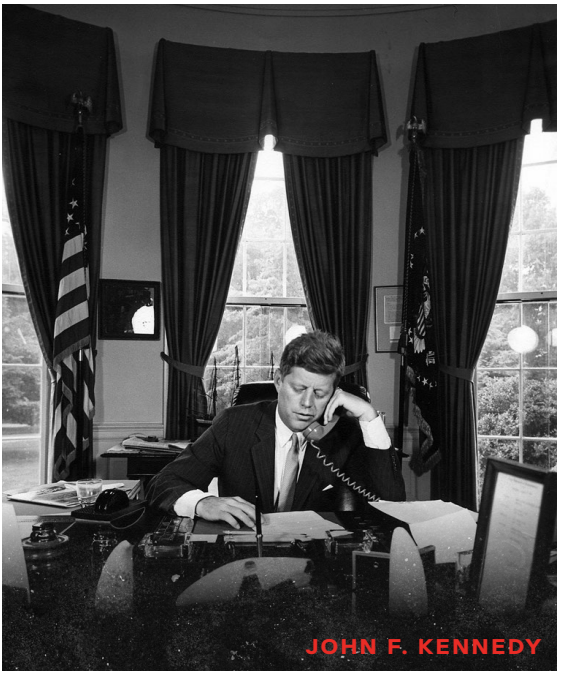
In the south, the Viet Cong were posing ever more of a threat. In some regions, Diệm's regime was losing control entirely. In early 1960, Nguyễn Thị Định, one of the few female commanders of the war, led a mass uprising in the impoverished riverine province of Ben Tre that toppled the local authorities.

KENNEDY'S CHOICE

By 1961, the VC had taken effective or partial control over numerous rural districts, particularly along Vietnam's border with Cambodia and Laos. With Diệm's regime losing its grip, it now fell to President John Kennedy to determine how the Americans should respond.

Like his predecessors Eisenhower and Truman, Kennedy believed in the domino theory: If communism succeeded, it seemed inevitable that it would spread to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, or even India. And it was clear to him that the conflict in South Vietnam was now both a civil war and a Cold War contest.

Kennedy's Cold War policy emphasized the concept of flexible response. It was designed to contain communism by reinforcing American advantages in nuclear weaponry, sea power, and airpower while also developing viable means of combating communist uprisings at the grassroots level in contested areas like Vietnam.



This meant counterinsurgency warfare. It called for Americans to immerse themselves in the culture on the ground, work closely with local military forces, and defeat enemy guerrillas at the village level. The army's newly created Special Forces units were especially suited to this socio-military mission.

Kennedy's instinct then was that America had to contain the insurgency in South Vietnam. At the same time, the president was leery of becoming enmeshed in a protracted war, and he had no wish to send large numbers of American troops to Vietnam.

But his actions indicated a man who had no intention of abandoning the South Vietnamese regime, and he acceded to Diệm's requests to step up the pace of aid. When Kennedy took office in 1961, there were about 700

American military personnel in the country. By the end of 1962, there were about 11,000, and at the time when he was assassinated in November 1963, that number had swelled to 16,000.

Euphemistically termed *advisors*, some were Special Forces soldiers who worked closely with South Vietnamese militiamen and soldiers at the village level and often personally fought against the VC. Most of the advisors, though, served in a noncombat capacity as administrators, planners, and logisticians to coordinate the many millions of dollars' worth of US aid and military hardware pouring into the country.

The Kennedy administration created a new organizational structure called Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or MACV, and placed General Paul Harkins in command. The Americans provided the South Vietnamese with transport aircraft, helicopters, and enough resources to expand the Army of the Republic of Vietnam to about 200,000 soldiers.

THE DIỆM REGIME'S ACTIONS

Buoyed by the growing American assistance, the Diệm regime in the early 1960s expanded its counterinsurgent efforts against the Viet Cong. In an attempt to isolate and destroy the VC, Diệm's government created the Agroville Program, mainly centered in the troublesome Mekong River delta. Government officials uprooted rural Vietnamese from their home villages and placed them into fortified compounds surrounded by barbed wire, fences, and guards. Ostensibly, the compounds were designed to protect people from VC encroachment.

But to many bewildered peasants, the Saigon government seemed like much more of a threat to their liberty than the VC. The Agroville Program failed miserably because it essentially deprived people of their freedom in the name of protecting their freedom.

In 1962, the regime tried a different tactic with the more extensive and farther-reaching Strategic Hamlet Program. The idea had a successful historical precedent in Malaya in the 1950s, where the British had helped defeat communist guerrillas by providing the population with local security. Instead of moving peasants into specially created compounds, the government erected fortified perimeters around existing villages

and smaller settlements known as hamlets. This solved the problem of uprooting people from their ancestral homes, but it did also force them to labor on the fortifications with no compensation, creating some resentment.

Diệm set the goal of establishing at least 7,000 strategic hamlets by the end of 1962. This was far too ambitious and encouraged a tendency for the government to overvalue superficial metrics. Corrupt officials sometimes appropriated program funds for themselves. Heavy-handed administrators occasionally behaved with arrogance and stupidity.

Eventually, Viet Cong local and main force units took to attacking hamlets, challenging the ARVN to defend them. And for obvious reasons, the government had great difficulty building strategic hamlets in VC-dominated areas, and nowhere near enough rural villagers felt real loyalty to Saigon. In the big picture, though the Strategic Hamlet Program represented an innovative and potentially effective approach to counterinsurgency, it did not fulfill its purpose of defeating the guerrillas at the village level.

CONCLUSION

By 1962, the fury and intensity of the war in South Vietnam was growing. The Department of Defense estimated that at least 10% of South Vietnam's villages were under VC control, and they exerted influence in another 60%. ARVN was stretched to its limit. The number of American advisors continued to increase.

In the north, the communist leadership, three years after making the fateful decision to unify Vietnam by force, was facing a quandary. Though the VC had made significant inroads in the countryside, their influence in the key cities and settlements was minimal.

Despite the ascendency of the interventionists, heavy debate broke out over whether to further escalate the war in the south to truly take the fight to Diệm, and how much of their limited resources they could devote to doing so. Their divisions reflected a growing schism between the Soviet Union and China. The Soviets urged de-escalation in South Vietnam. The Chinese pressed for a wider conflict in Southeast Asia and world revolution overall.

6

SOUTH VIETNAM IN CRISIS, 1963

On January 2, 1963, soldiers from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's 7th Infantry Division carried out an aerial and ground assault against prepared Viet Cong positions around the small village of Ap Bac in the Mekong delta. A Viet Cong main force battalion of 320 men had dug deep, well-camouflaged foxholes into excellent, rising, defensible ground. In an all-day battle, hundreds of ARVN troops and 11 Americans were killed or wounded, and the Viet Cong shot down five helicopters. By nightfall, having inflicted heavy losses on their enemies while losing only 18 of their own, the guerrillas slipped away to fight another day.

AP BAC AS A MICROCOSM

Government forces occupied Ap Bac, though this hardly guaranteed that they could maintain any permanent control over the place. Ap Bac was one of the first major pitched battles of the war. And by any reasonable assessment, it was a bloody setback for the South Vietnamese and their American advisors.

Despite being outnumbered five to one and heavily outgunned, the Viet Cong had inflicted significant casualties and then escaped. They had won by preparing strong defensive positions, enticing ARVN to assault them, and then foiling the attackers by shooting down vulnerable helicopters and pinning down the ground troops amid a welter of dikes, hedgerows, canals, and rice paddies.

The guerrillas then demonstrated an ability to disengage and get away from a numerically superior enemy force. This was a flexibility that would bedevil the non-communist side throughout the entire Vietnam War.

THE MILITARY SITUATION IN 1963

As 1963 unfolded, President Ngô Đình Diệm found himself dealing with an escalation of violence and turmoil. According to the communist official history of the war, infiltrators from the north had moved 165,000 weapons into the south between 1961 and 1963, mainly along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail.

This clandestine network of muddy trails and mountainous passes was being improved and expanded by a small army of laborers and military engineers, the 559th Transportation Group, allowing trucks carrying machine guns, artillery pieces, mortars, rifles, and grenades to flow southward as well. Northern soldiers were taking on an increasingly prominent role in the war against Diệm too.

RELIGIOUS TENSIONS

Internal political unrest was also tearing at the fabric of South Vietnam. The most serious anti-government demonstrations involved Buddhists, the majority religious faith in the country. Although Diệm's cabinet and the upper reaches of his government maintained a reasonable representative balance among Buddhists, Catholics, and Confucians, Diệm himself was a devout Catholic. Diệm had to contend with long-simmering resentments over religious discrimination because the Catholic Church had occupied a privileged position under the French.

In fairness to Diệm, his government made genuine efforts to support the majority religion. But Diệm's very overt Catholicism and continuation of pro-Catholic policies strongly colored his public perception, and lingering resentments from the colonial era festered.

In May 1963, this undercurrent of religious tension exploded into violence that provoked a serious political crisis. That month, Diệm unwisely—even disastrously—decided to enforce a longtime but generally ignored ordinance prohibiting religious groups from flying their own flags. The decree coincided with a major Buddhist holiday.

In the city of Hue, hundreds of defiant Buddhists flew their flags and took to the streets to protest what they saw as the government's blatant Catholic favoritism. Eventually, the situation got completely out of control. Troops opened fire, killing nine people and wounding several others. The killings sparked major demonstrations in more cities.

Most dramatically, a Buddhist monk named Thích Quảng Đức poured gasoline over his own body and burned himself to death in Saigon on June 11. The disturbing images of his fiery death, most notably an iconic photograph taken by Malcolm Browne, attracted massive, sensational international media coverage and later even inspired self-immolations by American peace activists.

Thích Trí Quang, a charismatic and uncompromising monk who deftly straddled the spiritual and political worlds, emerged as the leader of this nascent anti-government Buddhist movement that continued to grow throughout 1963. Throughout the entire Vietnam War era, he remained an ardent opponent of all non-communist Saigon governments.

The irony was that the North Vietnamese communists had already ruthlessly suppressed Buddhism and all other religious faiths in their country. By comparison, Diệm's actions against the Buddhists were mild. Even so, Diệm's handling of the crisis was insensitive and frequently repressive. And critically, he failed to rein in his entourage, who committed far worse blunders.

Ngô Đình Nhu, Diệm's hard-line younger brother, served as second-in-command in South Vietnam. Because Diệm was unmarried, Nhu's glamorous, pro-Western wife Trần Lệ Xuân assumed the role of first lady. Yet she became deeply unpopular with the public, pursuing an ostentatious lifestyle of Western luxury and becoming renowned for her incendiary public statements.

She openly mocked Thích Quảng Đức for immolating himself. Meanwhile, Nhu's security forces carried out raids against Buddhist pagodas, occasionally desecrating Buddhist religious symbols, and rounding up about 1,400 nuns and monks, some of whom disappeared altogether.

FRUSTRATION WITH DIỆM

To the casual international observer, especially some Americans, the Diệm regime seemed to be a reactionary, tyrannical, chaotic government run by ruthless individuals. The Kennedy administration had supported Diệm for nearly three years, but it now found itself in crisis over what to do in Vietnam.

On August 24, State Department officials drafted a telegram to be sent to the American embassy in Saigon, designated Cable 243. It presented an ultimatum: If Diệm did not disavow Nhu's raids and remove his brother and brother's wife from power, the US would not oppose a military coup to have Diệm removed.

At almost the same time, Kennedy had appointed his political rival Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. to the key post of ambassador to South Vietnam. Kennedy deftly neutralized the potential for Lodge to criticize his Vietnam policy by appointing him to the ambassadorship, a high-profile job Lodge could hardly turn down without seeming unpatriotic.

THE COUP

Lodge knew little of the situation in Vietnam, and upon arriving in the country in late August, he developed a low regard for Diệm. Armed with Cable 243 and a wide grant of authority by Kennedy, Lodge began intriguing with the ARVN to depose Diệm.

Yet even as the wheels were turning, the Kennedy administration remained deeply divided, and the administration prevaricated amidst conflicting reports from Saigon. Shouting matches frequently broke out between pro- and anti-Diệm advisors in the White House.

Eventually, President Kennedy cooled on the idea of a coup, though he did cut aid to South Vietnam. But critically, Lodge was not recalled, for fear that the ambassador might use this as a partisan issue against him in 1964. And Lodge continued supporting plotters against Diệm in Saigon.

By October, Lieutenant General Tôn Thất Đính, a Diệm loyalist who commanded the main garrison in Saigon, was turned by the plotters in an elaborate scheme. With Đính secured, Lodge told Kennedy a coup would be imminent, and it represented the best chance for progress in South Vietnam. Kennedy equivocated again, ultimately leaving the fateful judgement on whether to back the plotters to the ambassador.

Lodge had no such reservations. After a day and night of internecine fighting, the insurrectionists took control of the presidential palace and other key spots in Saigon. Diệm and Nhu were apprehended and executed by soldiers as they attempted to flee the country.

AFTER THE COUP

In Saigon, the coup was met with widespread celebrations by the public. But Kennedy was still torn, and he was shocked to hear of Diệm's death. In spite of his many difficulties with the South Vietnamese leader, he had viewed him as a patriot who did the best he could for his country.

Tragically, the American president himself only had a few more weeks to live. He was assassinated in Dallas on November 22, 1963.

The thorny problem of Vietnam passed to Kennedy's successor Lyndon Johnson, who was primarily interested in domestic issues. But he was also an ardent anti-communist and Cold Warrior. He agreed with the longtime American policy to contain communism wherever it threatened to spread.

The worsening situation in Vietnam gave the new president plenty more to worry about. The junta of South Vietnamese generals that succeeded Diệm quickly proved incapable of turning around either the country or the war and was racked by infighting. A power vacuum emerged.

The Viet Cong exploited the power vacuum and continued to grow in size and boldness. To make matters worse, the Chinese were stepping up their aid to North Vietnam, and, in turn, down the Hồ Chí Minh Trail to the Viet Cong. The network now included roads large enough to accommodate Chinese trucks serviced by new fueling and repair stations. Already, about four times more freight was moving from north to south than in previous years.

In Hanoi, members of the North Vietnamese leadership were debating their next move. They had been taken by surprise at Diệm's sudden removal, and now they had to determine how to respond. The militant south-first faction wanted to capitalize on the political chaos and the recent upswing in Viet Cong operations to strike a deadly blow. They urged a major escalation of the war.

Meanwhile, Hồ Chí Minh and the moderates argued for a policy of caution, lest aggressive communist actions prompt the United States to become more heavily involved in Vietnam. This approach was preferred by the Soviets, who were internationally seeking to calm, rather than inflame, Cold War tensions.

In the end, after several weeks of debate, the militants won out, largely due to the rising influence of Secretary-General Lê Duẩn, who by this point had assumed actual control of the North Vietnamese government. The die was now cast for a greater communist escalation in South Vietnam.

Violence rose dramatically, as did political turmoil. General Dương Văn Minh, who chaired the junta that took power from Diệm, lasted less than three months in the job before he was deposed in another coup by General Nguyễn Khánh. Public support for the new regime quickly eroded, religious tensions flared up again, and the turmoil in its senior ranks plagued the ARVN.

ESCALATION

The turmoil was eagerly exploited by the Viet Cong. In May of 1964, Viet Cong operatives attacked and sank the USNS *Card*, an American ship moored on the Saigon River. In July, guerrillas attempted to overrun a South Vietnamese and American camp at Nam Dong. North Vietnamese soldiers were now fighting directly against ARVN. By the middle of 1964, the communists controlled about 40% of South Vietnamese territory and almost half of the population.

Johnson and his administration now realized that the Saigon government was in mortal peril. He decided to do enough to stave off disaster in South Vietnam but without overly increasing American involvement. He increased aid to the Saigon government by $50 million and raised the number of US advisors in the country from 16,000 to 23,000. He replaced General Paul Harkins with General William Westmoreland as commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

Johnson also took a fateful step that would soon lead to a crucial escalation of the war. He approved the continuation of Operations Plan 34A, an initiative that Kennedy had set in motion the previous November in response to increased activity on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail and a general communist expansion of the war.

The plan authorized US forces to support covert raids by South Vietnamese special operations soldiers against North Vietnamese coastal targets. Notably, US Navy ships, ranging in size from patrol boats to destroyers, directly ferried or supported the commandos, putting American vessels on a potential collision course with North Vietnamese military forces. Indeed, American ships in the summer of 1964 would clash with the North Vietnamese in the Gulf of Tonkin, sparking an event that forever altered the course of the Vietnam War.

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THE GULF OF TONKIN AND A CROSSROADS, 1964

On August 2, 1964, a monumental event began unfolding in in the Gulf of Tonkin, just a few miles off the coast of North Vietnam in what American forces felt were international waters. The USS *Maddox*, a US Navy destroyer, and fighters from the aircraft carrier USS *Ticonderoga* engaged and heavily damaged three North Vietnamese vessels. The altercation came as tensions were ratcheting up to a crescendo between the US and North Vietnam.

THE SITUATION

President Lyndon Johnson, determined to demonstrate the right of American vessels to sail in international waters, ordered another destroyer, the USS *Turner Joy*, to join the *Maddox* on patrol. On the evening of August 4, storms and heavy seas buffeted their patrol area almost 100 nautical miles east of the North Vietnamese coast.

Both ships were suffering radar equipment issues and had limited visibility amidst the dark and stormy night. But sonar operators began receiving signals indicating that enemy boats were inbound once more.

The order was given to fire, and for the next two hours, the ships' gun crews fired off hundreds of shells and dropped five depth charges at ostensible targets. Yet overhead, Commander James Stockdale, the leader of a fighter squadron from the USS *Ticonderoga*, saw no sign of the enemy.

This supposed second engagement of what became known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident consisted of nothing more than understandably nervous American destroyers hurling ordnance in the empty waves. But in the immediate aftermath, no one, including Captain Herrick of the *Maddox*, was quite sure what had happened. His reports and those of his superiors initially suggested that a real fight had taken place that night.

President Johnson, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and other policymakers in Washington soon formed the opinion that the North Vietnamese had twice attacked American ships, the second time well within international waters. However, intercepts of North Vietnamese communications and eyewitness accounts like Stockdale's soon made plain that the second attack had been an illusion—the product of freak weather, confused sonar operators, and an environment of extreme tension in the gulf.

Nonetheless, Johnson and McNamara pressed ahead with plans to retaliate against North Vietnam. Johnson ordered air strikes by carrier planes against the patrol boat bases and went on national television to condemn what he called "open aggression on the high seas."

In the wake of this television address, Johnson pressed Congress for permission to expand American military operations in Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution granted to the president "all necessary measures to repel armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."

Within days of the alleged incident, and with minimal debate, the House voted 416 to 0 and the Senate 88 to 2 to pass the resolution. Johnson had effectively been handed a blank check to prosecute a war in Vietnam.

To be fair, it's debatable whether many in Congress truly understood the implications of their vote. The decision was made hastily amidst the atmosphere created by Johnson, who portrayed the affair as brazen aggression against US forces. Nor was Congress given the complete picture of the affair. Moreover, Johnson expertly used one of his old friends and key allies in the Senate, J. William Fulbright, to make the case in Congress for the resolution.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON'S MOTIVATIONS ★ THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT PRESIDENT JOHNSON'S BEHAVIOR WAS INFLUENCED BY THE UPCOMING 1964 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. HIS REPUBLICAN OPPONENT WAS THE CONVERSATIVE HAWK BARRY GOLDWATER, AN ARDENT ANTI-COMMUNIST WHO ADVOCATED AN UNAMBIGUOUS POLICY OF DOING WHATEVER WAS NECESSARY TO WIN IN VIETNAM. JOHNSON SOUGHT TO PORTRAY HIMSELF AS MORE STATESMANLIKE AND LEVEL-HEADED THAN GOLDWATER. AT THE SAME TIME, JOHNSON HAD NO INTENTION OF ALLOWING GOLDWATER TO PORTRAY HIM AS WEAK IN VIETNAM IN THE WAKE OF THE GULF OF TONKIN.

MORE VIOLENCE IN VIETNAM

By 1964, the Chinese had massively increased aid to North Vietnam to the tune of $110 million, lavishing their allies with brand-new AK-47 rifles, modern machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, 82-millimeter mortars, and even MiG-17 fighter planes. China also successfully tested a nuclear weapon. And now the Soviet Union was joining the fray as well. Leonid Brezhnev, taking power in the Soviet Union in late 1964, reversed Nikita Khrushchev's policy of noninterference and began shipping arms and advisors to North Vietnam.

In late 1964 and early 1965, the Viet Cong stepped up the violence in South Vietnam. On November 1, they mortared the Bien Hoa Air Base just north of Saigon, killing four Americans and two South Vietnamese, while destroying nine aircraft and damaging many more. A month later, the newly arrived NVA soldiers joined forces with insurgents to defeat the ARVN in a battle at An Lao. They also overran an ARVN outpost at Tam Kỳ, killing nine. On Christmas Eve, a pair of guerrillas detonated a car bomb underneath the Brinks Hotel, home to many US Army officers and a symbol of the American presence in Vietnam; 2 officers were killed, and 60 others wounded.

The new year only saw an increase in the bloodshed. On February 7, Viet Cong guerrillas attacked an American air base near Pleiku, injuring more than 100 and wrecking 10 aircraft.

In Saigon, the political turmoil that had plagued South Vietnam in 1963 continued. The South Vietnamese regime remained in the grasp of a shaky junta of generals.

THE COMMUNIST CONTEXT

In the face of this political mess and the deadly communist attacks, Johnson pondered how to respond. He had no desire to become involved in a wider war in Vietnam, and he privately had serious doubts about the prospects for victory.

Critically, though, like his predecessors, Johnson believed that the fall of South Vietnam could trigger a domino effect that might deliver all of Southeast Asia, and perhaps beyond, into the communist sphere of influence. And this was hardly theoretical, given the nearby parallel conflict in Indonesia.

Once a restive Dutch colony, Indonesia became an independent country after World War II under the leadership of Sukarno, a popular but impulsive nationalist. This huge archipelago of more than 17,000 islands was home to several hundred ethnic groups and languages. And by the 1960s, it was the fifth most populous country in the world and the largest Muslim-majority nation.

It also contained the third-largest communist organization, known as the PKI, and a substantial ethnic Chinese minority. Mao's communist government had significant influence over the PKI.

By 1963, the communists launched a militia campaign designed to forcibly redistribute land in agricultural areas, some of it American-owned. Sukarno responded to the communist agrarian program by forging even closer diplomatic ties with China.

President Johnson himself was concerned. If the PKI took power, or even if Indonesia simply became a reliable client state of China, the entire anti-communist position in the region might come unhinged.

Throughout 1965 and 1966, right-wing forces, with the assistance of the CIA, struck back against the PKI. A loose coalition consisting of the Indonesian armed forces, grassroots paramilitary organizations, Muslim militias, and student organizations hunted down and massacred PKI members, communist operatives, ethnic Chinese, atheists, and anyone else they perceived to be affiliated with the PKI. Somewhere between 500,000 and 1 million people were killed. At least 600,000 more were imprisoned, some for as long as 30 years.

The CIA provided the Indonesian army with money, communications equipment, and, most importantly, detailed lists of PKI members and communist agents. In this sense, the US government played an active role in one of modern history's worst instances of mass killing—what some

might even term genocide. They also paved the way for regime change. In 1967, Sukarno was deposed by General Suharto, a staunch anti-communist and key figure in the purge of the PKI.

The suppression of the PKI and communism in the archipelago dealt a staggering blow to Chinese ambitions and influence in the region. At the same time, this outcome also put Vietnam at the epicenter of the Cold War contest between China and the United States, and it freed up both powers, especially the Americans, to focus their attention on Southeast Asia.

This was the broader context in which Johnson approached his decision-making during the early months of 1965. Nearly all his key advisors were urging him to respond vigorously to the communist attacks on American personnel and the surge in infiltration down the Hồ Chí Minh trail.

There were deeply personal reasons that also influenced Johnson's thinking in this period. As a senator in the 1950s, he had experienced firsthand the poisonous, paranoid bickering that unfolded after the Soviet Union became a nuclear power and the communists won the Chinese Civil War.

In its wake, demagogic senator Joseph McCarthy had dominated the political discourse by spouting a series of reckless accusations and conspiracy theories, most of which centered around the idea that major American institutions, including the federal government, were infused with traitorous communist spies.

Johnson had no wish to see this kind of self-flagellation infect the country again.

OPERATIONS FLAMING DART AND ROLLING THUNDER

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution had given Johnson substantial war powers. In February 1965, in response to the attack on Pleiku, he authorized Operation Flaming Dart, a series of raids by carrier planes against North Vietnamese installations just north of the 17th parallel.

Like presidents before and after him, Johnson's first inclination was to rely on airpower as an antidote to strategic problems. Johnson hoped that a large and destructive aerial campaign against North Vietnam might boost South Vietnamese morale and intimidate the Hanoi regime.

On March 2, a new series of attacks, known as Operation Rolling Thunder, began. Like the rest of Johnson's Vietnam War policy, the operation represented something of a compromise. General Curtis LeMay, the air force chief of staff, wanted permission for an all-out conventional bombing campaign to destroy 94 targets and basically lay waste to North Vietnam, similar to what the Allies had done to Germany and Japan in World War II.

Dean Rusk and the State Department argued that the objective of securing a non-communist South Vietnam did not have to mean the complete destruction of North Vietnam. Instead, they advocated for starting small and increasing the pressure only if Hanoi did not become more amenable to American aims.

Johnson embraced incrementalism with Rolling Thunder, a policy that angered some of his military commanders and led some of them to claim that he would not let them win in Vietnam. From March to June 1965, American planes bombed and strafed radar installations, barracks, ammo depots, bridges, and military storage facilities. Johnson himself picked many of the North Vietnamese targets, establishing a pattern that held for years, much to the frustrated consternation of his military advisors.

Hanoi responded to Rolling Thunder with more logistical support for the VC and more attacks on American bases in South Vietnam. The American commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, strongly recommended the introduction of ground combat troops to protect a major base at Da Nang, from which the air force was launching Rolling Thunder strikes.

The introduction of these troops would represent a major escalation of American involvement. Nevertheless, on March 8, 3,500 marines splashed ashore in full combat gear and moved into position to defend Da Nang.

Within a few weeks, in the wake of a VC car-bombing attack against the American embassy in Saigon, Westmoreland asked for the introduction of two full American infantry divisions—one to protect Saigon and the other to defend the central highlands. This would comprise about 40,000 troops. The Joint Chiefs endorsed the request and asked for even more troops. To sugarcoat this new escalation, Johnson offered the North Vietnamese a deal: He would call off Rolling Thunder and initiate a major aid program to North Vietnam if they would only agree to cease their support for the VC.

In Hanoi, Lê Duẩn and the politburo turned him down flat. Rolling Thunder would not prove to be the panacea Johnson had hoped. Airpower had failed to force the communists to the negotiating table. And now the Americans faced a stark choice between losing in Vietnam and sending hundreds of thousands of their own people to fight the war.

8

THE VIETNAM WAR IN THE SKIES

Much of the struggle in Vietnam played out in the air. American aerial capabilities were cutting-edge and remarkably powerful, yet they ultimately could not bring about an American victory. This lecture looks at why.

A MASSIVE CAMPAIGN

Aerial operations accounted for about half of the $200 billion spent on the Vietnam War by the US government. Between 1962 and 1973, the US and its allies dropped nearly 8 million tons of ordnance.

The centerpiece of the American air war was Operation Rolling Thunder, an enormous and sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam that lasted from March 1965 to October 1968. It had two primary strategic objectives as well as a secondary goal.

First, the Americans hoped to persuade North Vietnam's leadership to halt their support for the Viet Cong and negotiate an end to hostilities that recognized the continued existence of a non-communist South Vietnam. Second, the Americans wanted to halt the infiltration along the Hồ Chí Minh trail. An ancillary goal was that the bombing of the north might boost morale in the south.

Rolling Thunder was not really designed to destroy North Vietnam so much as to degrade its willingness and capacity to continue the war. Though some of the military establishment had initially argued for an all-out campaign to obliterate North Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson flatly refused to authorize this total war concept.

ROLLING THUNDER, PHASES 1 AND 2

Regardless of the original intent, Rolling Thunder did grow steadily larger and more destructive over time, with more permissive rules of engagement as it unfolded over the course of more than three years. There were five major phases to the operation. In general, each phase represented some sort of tactical or policy shift.

Phase 1 lasted from March to June 1965. It involved 25,000 sorties and the dropping of 63,000 tons of bombs. A sortie involves one aircraft flying one mission. Primary targets included radar sites, ammunition depots, barracks, and other key military infrastructure. Johnson hoped that this initial show of force would bring the north to the negotiating table over the status of South Vietnam. Hanoi, however, remained resolute.

Once the US began to send combat troops to South Vietnam, the goals of the air campaign changed, and phase 2 of Rolling Thunder began, lasting from July 1965 to June 1966. It focused on interdiction, an effort to halt all southerly movement of anything that might assist the VC's war effort.

By now, though, about 750,000 North Vietnamese and many thousands of Chinese personnel were absorbed in the air defense of northern skies. With the help of Soviet radar and missile technology, plus a growing force of fighter planes, the communist antiaircraft system was becoming increasingly formidable.

On April 3, 1965, the Vietnam People's Air Force, or VPAF, engaged in one of their first air-to-air engagements, intercepting the US Air Force bombing of the Thanh Hoa Bridge. To the shock of the Americans, a small wing

of relatively dated MiG-17s with rookie pilots managed to take down two supersonic F-105 Thunderchiefs in the ensuing dogfight. Though all the MiGs were eventually downed, the North Vietnamese were jubilant.

Between the rough-and-ready VPAF and a growing network of antiair defenses and radar warning systems, the United States lost hundreds of planes in the second phase. The number of troops moving from North to South Vietnam more than doubled in this period.

ROLLING THUNDER, PHASES 3–5

The Americans now decided to destroy North Vietnam's petroleum and oil capacity. Thus, phase 3 of Rolling Thunder was dominated by missions against petroleum, oil, and lubricants, or POL, targets. It lasted from June to October 1966.

American forces succeeded in destroying more than 70% of North Vietnam's fuel storage capacity. The communists dispersed the other 30% into 55-gallon drums and stored them in populated areas they knew the US would not bomb.

This phase of bombing and others only made the North Vietnamese population more determined to keep fighting. Indeed, the regime in Hanoi was strengthened. The nationwide effort necessary to defend home skies gave the politburo more control over the day-to-day lives of everyday people as well as the propaganda that helped sustain their morale.

Phase 4, the longest and most destructive of Rolling Thunder, began in October 1966 and lasted until May 1967, while phase 5 continued for another year and a half. Restrictions were significantly loosened. For the first time, Johnson authorized the bombing of the key cities of Hanoi and Haiphong, along with the country's power and industrial base. Attacks intensified against infrastructure, factories, power plants, transformers, and bridges.

To maximize efficiency and divide responsibilities, a coordinating team comprised of navy and air force personnel split North Vietnamese air space into seven clearly delineated sectors called Route Packages. The navy's carrier-rich Task Force 77 handled the coastal areas of Route Packages 2, 3, 4, and 6B. The air force, from its bases in Thailand and South Vietnam, dealt with the others, including 6A, the most urbanized part of the country.

With the continued help of the Soviets, the North Vietnamese had, by the fourth phase of Rolling Thunder, created a very potent air defense system. VPAF now boasted over 150 MiG fighters. Among them now were the supersonic MiG-21s. These proved the bane of the USAF, used by the north for rapid, multidirectional interceptions.

An even greater threat to the Americans was the formidable network of ground-based air defenses that now included 400 radar stations, more than 8,000 antiaircraft guns, and 40 Soviet-made SA-2 surface-to-air missile sites. These SAMs, as Americans called them, were especially deadly, particularly at high altitudes. SAMs brought down around 150 US planes during the war.

THE AIR WAR TAKES ITS TOLL

With the north now holding its own in the air, Rolling Thunder became a costly enterprise. In some US fighter-bomber squadrons, attrition rates ran between 50% and 75%.

By the fall of 1967, Rolling Thunder continued to founder. For every dollar of damage the US inflicted upon North Vietnam, it was paying more than $9. Yet morale in the north remained unmoved, and the number of soldiers and supplies filtering south had doubled once again from the previous year. Meanwhile, Johnson's attempt to limit the scope of the campaign had come to little, as it had not prevented international outcry nor substantial domestic opposition from arising. The administration itself was now deeply divided over Rolling Thunder.

The Senate Armed Services Committee, headed up by the hawkish Mississippian John Stennis, held hearings to examine the air war. Eventually, Stennis and several other senators called for the bombing of

57 key targets, many of which were located close to the Chinese border or in the politically sensitive Hanoi corridor that American pilots called Thud Ridge.

In the fall of 1967, Johnson authorized the bombing of 52 of the 57 recommended targets. During that calendar year, the Americans flew 108,000 sorties against North Vietnam and dropped a staggering 226,000 tons of ordnance.

But the Chinese and the Soviets continued to replenish North Vietnamese losses. Plus, the communists needed only a few dozen trucks' worth of supplies each month to get to South Vietnam to keep the VC going.

WINDING DOWN

The final months of Rolling Thunder lasted from March to October 1968. The pattern of strategic ineffectiveness remained, though. On the eve of the presidential election that year, Johnson finally ended the operation.

Over three years, the Americans had flown 700,000 sorties and dropped 600,000 tons of bombs. At least 900 planes were lost during the operation—70% of the total air losses in the entire war—with hundreds of aviators killed, missing, or taken prisoner. Vietnamese pilots claim to have shot down 266 of these.

During Rolling Thunder, 18 Soviets and 771 Chinese were killed. The operation also brought the deaths of about 20,000 North Vietnamese soldiers and at least 30,000 civilians.

In spite of the losses, communist morale never came close to buckling. Infiltration south only increased. International condemnation of the US and its war in Vietnam grew. Overall, Rolling Thunder was a poignant reminder that wars aren't won on airpower alone, and there are real limits to what strategic bombing can accomplish.

OPERATION STEEL TIGER

Another major concentration of the US strategic air campaign was disrupting the Hồ Chí Minh trail in Laos. Operation Steel Tiger lasted from April 1965 to November 1968, and it continued from November 1968 to April 1972 under the name Operation Commando Hunt. The Seventh Air Force and the navy's Task Force 77 relentlessly raided base camps, roads, marshaling areas, and any other route of movement through selected portions of eastern Laos.

In 1961, the US, the Soviet Union, and a dozen other countries had brokered a peace settlement in Laos that called for power sharing among warring factions of royalists, moderates, and communists, the latter of whom were known as the Pathet Lao. In effect, the Pathet Lao controlled the rugged, remote regions of eastern Laos that comprised perfect terrain through which to covertly infiltrate troops and supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese enjoyed a vital sphere of influence and a crucial main supply route in this region—an asset of incalculable value to their war effort.

Steel Tiger attempted to disrupt this asset using airpower. It was diplomatically risky because Laos was a neutral country. As with Rolling Thunder, Johnson worried deeply that the bombing of Laos could lead to a wider war with China or the Soviet Union or provoke a major international outcry. Therefore, he and other civilians often chose the targets and established strict rules of engagement.

For the duration of the conflict, the Americans never seemed to contemplate doing anything substantial to turn the propaganda tables on the North Vietnamese to influence world opinion. It was the North Vietnamese who had first violated Laotian neutrality and turned its eastern frontiers into a vast military logistical network, and they had done this in direct violation of the 1961 agreement. In that context, the US response seemed to have at least some justification. But while both sides willfully violated Laotian neutrality, only the Americans paid any strategic price for this, mainly in terms of international condemnation.

AMERICAN AIRCRAFT ★ DURING STEEL TIGER AND COMMANDO HUNT, AMERICAN COMMANDERS EMPLOYED A DIVERSE RANGE OF AIRCRAFT. GUAM-BASED B-52 STRATOFORTRESSES FLEW HUNDREDS OF MISSIONS AGAINST THE HỒ CHÍ MINH TRAIL. THE AMERICANS REGULARLY POUNDED TARGETS WITH FOUR-ENGINE AC-130 GUNSHIPS, TWIN-ENGINE AC-119 GUNSHIPS, AND THE VENERABLE AC-47. AND THE F-4 PHANTOM WAS THE MOST COMMON AND VERSATILE FIGHTER PLANE IN THE VIETNAM ERA, USED BY THE AIR FORCE, THE NAVY, AND THE MARINES.

Over seven long years of raids against the Hồ Chí Minh Trail in Laos, the Americans inflicted tremendous damage on the communists. They killed many thousands of enemy soldiers and destroyed untold numbers of trucks, antiaircraft guns, supply caches, and base camps.

Yet North Vietnamese ingenuity and adaptability limited the effectiveness of American airpower. The communists circumvented American tactics by developing novel logistics systems.

An elaborate truck-relay system was developed on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, in which trucks would shuttle back and forth between way stations, exchanging their loads at each. These way stations coincided with the distance a truck could travel between dusk and dawn, the night hours during which American air raids were far less likely or effective. If a truck was lost, it was replaced from the pool at the previous way station, keeping a constant supply in circulation.

American planes could do damage, but they could not by themselves solve the Hồ Chí Minh Trail problem. In truth, the only way to do that would have been to take the area with ground troops.

9

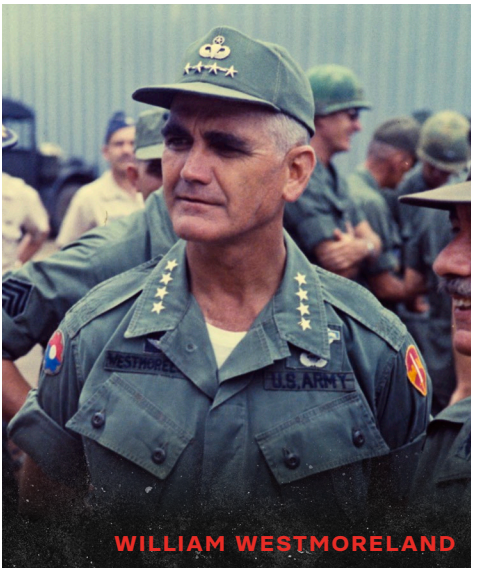
AMERICA GOES ALL IN, 1965

The year 1965 was pivotal in the history of the Vietnam War. South Vietnam was teetering under the pressure of the Viet Cong. The Pentagon now estimated that around 100 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army, or NVA, battalions were present in the south, with each battalion consisting of anywhere from 200 to 1,000 fighters. Among these were the well-armed, well-trained main force VC. They could strike anywhere in South Vietnam and were, by American estimates, at least 50,000 in number. They were chalking up serious victories.

THE SITUATION IN 1965

In June of 1965, a main force overwhelmed several regiments of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), including three US-trained ranger battalions, to capture the provincial capital at Dong Xoai, just 60 miles from Saigon. Though the VC chose to withdraw rather than try to hold the territory, a major defeat so close to the capital deeply unnerved allied forces.

Adding to the chaos, just days after the battle, another coup was staged in Saigon—the fourth in just two years. Nguyễn Khánh was out, and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ came to power. Post-Diệm South Vietnam had degenerated into a series of political fiefdoms, and Kỳ was one of its most powerful new warlords.



WILLIAM WESTMORELAND

Trying to preserve the American mission in Vietnam against this dismal backdrop was General William Westmoreland, the commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or MACV. The general had reluctantly arrived at the conclusion that only the introduction of substantial American ground forces could stave off total defeat in Vietnam. At a minimum, he wanted 150,000 soldiers immediately and probably twice that number by early 1966.

TWO BAD OPTIONS

Johnson found himself with two unattractive options. First, he could cut his losses and abandon South Vietnam, perhaps through some face-saving treaty. But Johnson worried, as his predecessors had, that a pullout would have terrible consequences for the United States in the Cold War. Without much question, communist influence—especially from China—would have expanded substantially in Asia and the Pacific.

Johnson's second option was to send hundreds of thousands of American ground troops to a faraway country to fight a bloody war. Throughout July of 1965, he consulted widely on the administration's Vietnam policy, and debated the decision at length in the National Security Council. His advisors were unanimous: America was at a crossroads, and a decision had to be made on whether to commit or retreat.

Yet, crucially, nearly all the key figures in the administration—including Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy—agreed that America had to increase its commitment to hold the line in Vietnam. This position was argued even more strongly by most of the top military brass. Johnson consulted the leadership of both parties in Congress, who also broadly agreed to escalation.

Throughout 1965, polling consistently indicated strong majorities in favor of maintaining US involvement in Vietnam, though there was some opposition to the war emerging, including student antiwar protests. Several influential politicians, some of whom had backed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, like Senator J. William Fulbright, had started to question the wisdom of the conflict. But in mid-1965, dissenting voices were a small minority.

At the meeting of the National Security Council on July 27, Johnson announced that the path forward would be to expand the US deployment in Vietnam. The next day, Johnson addressed the nation to announce his decision to send an additional 50,000 troops to South Vietnam and to double the monthly draft call.

GRADUALISM

As Johnson sent hundreds of thousands of US troops to Vietnam, he insisted on fighting a gradually escalating limited war designed to pressure Hanoi into abandoning the hope of uniting the country under communist control. Johnson's gradualism was out of caution at provoking a response, or even a war, with China and/or the Soviet Union.

This concern was so acute that he would not allow the reserves and National Guard to be mobilized to fight in Vietnam, fearing the signal it would send. The Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed Johnson's policy of gradualism; the previous year, they had proposed a much more aggressive set of actions.

WESTMORELAND'S PLAN

Regardless, Westmoreland had his troops, and so he devised a plan to turn the situation in Vietnam around. Westmoreland's plan had four points. First, he assigned a new mission to the beleaguered South Vietnamese military forces. No longer would they carry the brunt of the fighting. Instead, he wanted the South Vietnamese to assume responsibility for pacification—the winning of hearts and minds in the countryside. This goal was subordinate to defeating the enemy's armed forces.

Second, currently deployed US forces would stem the tide of enemy successes, stabilize the security situation, and buy time for the growing American military presence. Once that was accomplished, he planned thirdly for his army to go on the offensive to fight a big-unit war to destroy enemy forces.

The final element of the plan boiled down to an attrition strategy: wear down the communists with American mobility, firepower, and technology. Rather than permanently secure geographic objectives, the main goal was to inflict massive losses on the enemy until they could no longer be replaced, at which point the exhausted communists would be forced to sue for peace and recognize the legitimacy of the Saigon government.

Notably, Westmoreland's plan emphasized combat, with pacification as a secondary objective. But pacification was arguably the most important mission. If the South Vietnamese population could not be persuaded to support the aims of the Saigon government and not to supply the insurgency, then the whole war effort rested on a house of cards.

Westmoreland's plan to assign the ARVN to this critical task made sense in theory. Yet South Vietnamese commanders and officials were anything but pleased with being shunted aside while the Americans took over the war. Moreover, the ARVN was designed and trained for conventional warfare, and their units were prone to corruption and factionalism, factors which didn't exactly endear them to ordinary Vietnamese.

A COALITION AND ITS CHALLENGES

To fight the newly expanding ground war proposed by Westmoreland, the Americans started assembling an international coalition called the Many Flags campaign. Australia and New Zealand sent troops, as did the Philippines and Thailand. The latter also served as a prime location for American air bases. Taiwan sent a token force and military aid.

South Korea contributed the largest military contingent after the US. Two South Korean combat divisions, plus a marine brigade, fought in Vietnam, and some 300,000 troops served in the country over the span of the war. South Korean soldiers detested communism as veterans from their own war against it, and they developed a hard-edged reputation as ferocious in action against the Viet Cong. They also perpetrated numerous massacres that led to the deaths of hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of civilians—a grim side of the war that remains relatively overlooked.

South Vietnam had little of the necessary infrastructure to sustain these burgeoning allied military forces. Most of the country was without proper roads, electricity, sewage and water treatment facilities, and other modern amenities. American engineers, logisticians, and technical experts set to work transforming the country to support the vast military enterprise.

One of the most dramatic transformations was at Cam Ranh Bay near Saigon. An army of engineers turned its sandy peninsula into a thriving logistical base that featured a deep-water harbor whose specially built piers could handle 6,000 tons of cargo per day, enough to ease pressure from the overtaxed docks of Saigon.

Necessary infrastructure work also encompassed far less glamorous tasks. Vietnam lacked sewage systems, so the Americans had to build their own makeshift latrines at the dozens of base camps that were now proliferating the country.

EVENTS IN BATTLE

In Hanoi, Lê Duẩn watched the American buildup with a mixture of dismay and determination. Johnson's decision to send a sizable army to Vietnam was a stunning setback, and now the communists faced a long, bloody struggle against the world's most powerful nation and some of its allies.

The communists had to settle for sending NVA formations into the central highlands in the second half of 1965 with the goal of cutting the country in two. Farther to the south, the goal was establishing control over the roads that led from Saigon to the Cambodian border, where illicit Viet Cong base camps proliferated in dense jungle terrain.

At the same time, Westmoreland's rapidly growing army attempted to counter these moves. He and his staff organized the country into four tactical zones: I Corps in the north, II Corps in the central highlands, III Corps in Saigon and its environs, and IV Corps in the extreme south. In the first three zones, the Americans were soon in the thick of fighting.

In I Corps, Major General Lewis Walt's 3rd Marine Division was becoming a major presence around Da Nang, Phu Bai, and Chu Lai. In mid-August, a VC deserter tipped the Americans off that his unit of 1,500 men was holed up at Van Tuong, a coastal village.

Walt subsequently planned Operation Starlite, a simultaneous attack on the VC by land, air, and amphibious invasion. This would be the first major operation of the intervention, and Westmoreland's strategy would be put to the test.

The assault began on August 18. The prisoner was right: His outfit was holed up in well-sited bunkers, trenches, tunnels, and private dwellings around the village. They were armed with AK-47s, RPGs, and machine guns. The amphibious marines, as well as those coming overland from the west and by helicopter, were soon in the middle of a close-up fight. Villagers were mixed in with the VC; some were hit in the crossfire.

The Americans called in artillery, air strikes, and naval gunfire. The VC were effectively trapped and facing vastly superior firepower, so they fought ferociously to break out. Those who couldn't fought to the death at close quarters.

The operation lasted about 24 hours. It was successful in that the VC forces had been surprised, pushed against the sea, and destroyed by US firepower. More than 600 VC casualties were counted after the battle. But it was costly to the marines as well, who had hundreds of their own killed or wounded. Starlite was a victory, but it showed that the communists could exact a heavy price on the Americans.

As summer turned to fall, the violence intensified. In III Corps, the Americans attempted to establish control over the roads that led from Saigon to the Cambodian border by conducting sweeps and building artillery firebases from which they projected power into the jungle. VC forces occasionally reacted violently to American encroachment on their key positions.

IA DRANG

The largest battle of 1965 was fought at Ia Drang in the central highlands of II Corps. There, Hanoi had sent the better part of an NVA division with the mission of slashing from their Cambodian sanctuaries to the sea in hopes of cutting South Vietnam in two. The arrival of the 1st Cavalry Division under Major General Harry Kinnard put a serious crimp into that plan.

Equipped with more than 400 helicopters to shuttle infantry, artillery, and engineers, the 1st Cavalry Division was in theory ideally suited to take on an oft-elusive insurgent enemy. The division arrived in Vietnam in September, established a base camp at An Khe, and began patrolling a large area of operations all the way to the border.

Soon they detected a major VC buildup at Chu Pong Massif, straddling the border. On November 14, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, under Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, conducted an airmobile assault at Landing Zone X-Ray, in this vicinity. The NVA reacted with a series of violent attacks, initiating a ferocious three-day battle in which Moore's troopers fought desperately to avoid annihilation.

Their valor, plus support from air strikes and untold thousands of artillery shells fired from a nearby firebase, staved off the enemy. This battle was made famous in the book *We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young*. The movie *We Were Soldiers* further cemented the engagement in popular memory.

However, the movie did not portray the troubling battle that was fought after the shooting had petered out at X-Ray. At another landing zone called Albany, the retreating NVA unleashed a horseshoe-shaped ambush on the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry as it moved in a column through the jungle, prompting yet another day-long existential fight.

NVA soldiers killed isolated, helpless, wounded troopers. Massive artillery and air strikes, including napalm, helped stave off total disaster. In the fighting, 151 Americans were killed, 121 were wounded, and 5 went missing—a 50% casualty rate. In a typical modern battle, American combat units sustain 3 or 4 wounded for every soldier killed. Thus, the ratio of killed to wounded testifies to the seriousness of the Albany fighting.

Ia Drang was something of a shock to both sides. The Americans began to realize the full scope of the communist commitment to conquer South Vietnam, and public opinion was stunned by the heavy losses. But the north had failed to cut the country in two and lost almost three full infantry regiments in the process. They now tended to favor small-unit, ambush-style combat, and only on their own terms. The tone of the war was now set.

10

THE WORLD OF THE AMERICAN COMBAT SOLDIER

American combat soldiers are this lecture's topic. By 1965, they were fighting in ever greater numbers in South Vietnam. These were the best-educated, best-trained soldiers in American history up to that time.

SOLDIERS AND THE DRAFT

American soldiers in Vietnam were not National Guardsmen or reservists. From the beginning, President Lyndon Johnson chose not to mobilize these, lest he send an overly saber-rattling message about his intentions to the communist world and the American electorate. By the time President Richard Nixon came along, he was focused on scaling back the American military commitment rather than adding new units.

This meant that the war was largely fought by full-time, active-duty citizen soldiers, either draftees or volunteers. During the Vietnam era, the Selective Service draft applied to men of military age, generally those between their 18th and 26th birthdays. But a draft notice did not necessarily mean a recipient was on their way to Vietnam. Physical, mental, and emotional standards for induction were relatively high, and many hundreds

of thousands of men were rejected. More commonly, people could take advantage of many kinds of deferments, such as those tied to marriage, fatherhood, working in an essential industry or federal service, or even being the only person available to run a family farm or business.

The most popular deferment was higher education. Until late 1969, any full-time student at a college or university could claim a deferment. People could also file for conscientious objector status, go to Canada or Mexico, refuse to report for induction and go on the lam, or persuade a friendly doctor to diagnose a physical ailment that caused draft ineligibility.

All of this meant that the draft happened to those who couldn't afford to go to college full-time or lacked the connections to get another kind of deferment, though many simply let themselves be drafted, usually

from a sense of personal obligation to serve. And hundreds of thousands volunteered for service. About two-thirds of those who served in Vietnam were volunteers.

In the early years of the conflict, African Americans fell prey to the draft and served in combat units well out of proportion to their overall numbers. African Americans often did not have the means to attain college deferments or the social advantages to find other ways out of service.

In 1966, Black personnel comprised 13% of the force in Vietnam but suffered 23% of the casualties. In response to criticism from civil rights leaders, after 1966, the armed forces took steps to even the playing field, drafting fewer minorities and specifically attempting to keep African Americans out of combat units. Over the full expanse of the war, African Americans accounted for around 12% of the deaths in Vietnam, roughly commensurate with their representation across the armed services and American population.

ORGANIZING SOLDIERS

Once recruited and trained, a soldier would be assigned to a squad, the basic building block of combat forces, consisting of 8 to 14 soldiers. The squad was under command of a sergeant, who was supported by a radio telephone operator, or RTO. Most of the other squad members were riflemen. A typical squad also contained two M79 grenadiers and at least one M60 machine gunner, with an assistant who might function as a loader.

Four squads—about 40 soldiers—made up a platoon. It was commanded by the lowest-ranking commissioned officer, either a first or second lieutenant. The platoon leader's command group included an RTO, a medic, and a platoon sergeant. The platoon sergeant functioned as a second-in-command.

The basic maneuver unit of all ground combat was a company, which was made up of four platoons and usually commanded by a captain. One of the platoons was a weapons platoon that operated the big guns, including 60-millimeter mortars, light antitank weapons, and machine guns, the latter of which were attached to the rifle squads. The executive officer, the company clerk, the supply sergeant, and often the first sergeant stayed in the rear, usually at a base of some sort, to deal with administrative matters.

A battalion, commanded by a major or lieutenant colonel, consisted of four or five companies. These were lettered from A to E, with nicknames that derived from radio phonetics: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, and Echo. Alpha through Delta would be rifle companies. Echo might be recon or support. Additionally, there would be a headquarters company that dealt with administrative duties. At full strength, a battalion consisted of around 900 men, including a staff. Battalions in turn made up brigades, and brigades made up divisions, and divisions made up corps.

Brigades, divisions, and corps were the top-level strategic units operating in Vietnam under Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or MACV. The US Army's corps-sized I Field Force and II Field Force operated in the II and III Corps regions, respectively. Two corps-sized commands—the marines' 3rd Amphibious Force and the army's XXIV Corps—fought in the highly contested I Corps region. All were supported by the United States Army Vietnam, the sprawling, corps-sized headquarters that

REVEALING GRAFFITI ★ DURING THE VIETNAM WAR, AMERICAN SOLDIERS' UNIQUE PERSONALITIES AND THEIR VERY AMERICANNESS REMAINED IN EVIDENCE. NOWHERE WAS THIS MORE APPARENT THAN IN THE GRAFFITI THEY SOMETIMES SCRAWLED ON THE CAMOUFLAGE COVERS OF THEIR HELMETS. THE MOST COMMON WRITINGS CENTERED AROUND TOURS OF DUTY. MEN ROUTINELY DREW ELABORATE CALENDARS ON THEIR COVERS, OR SOMETIMES THEY JUST LISTED THE MONTHS. AS EACH ONE ELAPSED, THEY CROSSED IT OUT, PROGRESSING THEM CLOSER TO HOME. SOME WROTE RELIGIOUS STATEMENTS, EXCERPTS FROM POEMS, OR POPULAR SONG LYRICS. OTHERS' HELMETS SIMPLY SPORTED SARDONIC OR IRREVERENT SLOGANS THAT OFFERED MOMENTS OF LEVITY IN AN OTHERWISE BLEAK EXISTENCE. "VIETNAM MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH" WAS A POPULAR ONE.

coordinated logistical, signals, intelligence, medical, and general support from its base in Long Binh. Only the southernmost IV Corps region had no regular US presence, defended instead by ARVN forces.

All told, around half a million US troops were serving under this structure by the late 1960s. About 3 million Americans in total served throughout the war. Only about 15% to 20% of those served in ground combat positions, yet the combat infantry represented over 80% of the casualties.

LIFE OF A COMBAT SOLDIER

Corps and divisions were the world of the generals, but the combat soldier's world was much smaller. The Vietnam War was generally comprised not of massed battles, as with World Wars I and II, but of skirmishes, patrols, and small-unit encounters. The squad or platoon was each soldier's world.

Once assigned to one, a combat soldier or marine underwent an intense process of inculturation that had three distinct stages. Soldiers would start as new recruits with little status, and these individuals faced great danger: New soldiers seldom knew how to comport themselves, and 43% of army deaths and a third of marine combat deaths occurred among those in the first three months of their tours.

The new-recruit stage usually lasted one or two months. After that, soldiers entered the second and longest-lasting stage of their time in Vietnam: becoming a veteran, a period of 3 to 11 months. Many veterans had developed a sixth sense for how to spot danger and ferret out VC soldiers. They were lean, tough, and capable of enduring the appalling conditions.

From Vietnam, a soldier or marine rotated home after a fixed amount of time—a policy guaranteed to create personnel chaos and a constant learning curve in combat units, but a necessary measure for such a protracted, and eventually unpopular, war. The typical army soldier served a one-year tour of duty. For marines, it was usually 13 months. And most everyone dreamed of and anticipated his DEROS, or date of estimated return from overseas.

When a soldier's DEROS came into sight, they entered the third stage and became a short-timer. At this point, effectiveness was likely to drop off, probably dramatically. Soldiers near their DEROS had survived a lot and had probably seen friends die. They would be reluctant to take any unnecessary chances.

The smartest commanders knew they probably could not count on short-timers to do much fighting and realized how devastating it would be to unit morale if the guy who was about to go home got killed. Whenever possible, they rotated short-timers out of the field to safer duty in a base camp or some other rear area. As a result, short-timers tended to make it across the finish line. Men in the final quarter of their tours accounted for only 6.5% of army combat deaths and 5.2% of marine deaths.

COMBAT

The nature of combat varied enormously depending on what part of the country a soldier served in and during which campaigns. The siege of Khe Sanh was almost analogous to World War I–style trench warfare. The battles of Hue and Hamburger Hill, and a legion of other urban and hill fights, equated to World War II–style advance-and-attack battles.

Often throughout the war, static perimeter fighting abounded in the defense of firebases against all-out VC or NVA assaults, the best examples being titanic battles at Bau Bang in 1965 and the bitter 1968 struggle for Firebase Burt, which inspired the dramatic final fight of the movie *Platoon*. In the extreme southern part of the country, hit-and-run riverine warfare prevailed.

Most commonly for Americans, though, combat simply meant being in the field, or the so-called bush or boonies, to utilize phrases prevalent among soldiers. The vast majority of time, they patrolled, hoping to find the enemy, but nothing happened. The communists proved very adept at avoiding combat when they wanted to and only initiating action on their terms. The communist side fired the first shot in 90% of all Vietnam War engagements.

DAILY ROUTINES

Daily life for an American soldier typically consisted of rising early in the morning, handling chores, then setting off on patrol. That involved walking through suffocating heat in difficult terrain while still maintaining concentration to watch for attacks.

Late in the afternoon, having reached the day's objective or progressed close enough to it to satisfy headquarters, they would receive orders to set up a night defensive perimeter, or NDP. Soldiers then spent hours digging foxholes or bunkers, filling sandbags to protect their new positions, and clearing foliage to create open fields of fire for their weapons. This was hard, exhausting work.

Once done, they emplaced trip flares and antipersonnel claymore mines in front of their holes. Before darkness, they settled down and ate their rations, or maybe, if the area was quiet, enjoyed a buffet-style meal.

At night, if a grunt was lucky, he stayed in his foxhole, stood guard for two hours, and then slept for two hours while his bunker or foxhole buddy kept watch. If he was not lucky, he was picked by a squad or platoon leader for an ambush patrol or listening post.

All night long, an ambush patrol sat in a concealed spot about 500 to 1,000 meters beyond the perimeter. Usually, each man had to stay awake all night. Periodically, a radio man quietly reported the situation to the perimeter command post.

If the night remained quiet, as it normally did, they would pack up and return to the main perimeter just before dawn. Then the soldiers would start another day largely like the one before. Often the inaction stretched on for weeks, punctuated only by a few sniper incidents or 10-minute firefights, or the odd mortar round or booby trap. For many American soldiers, that was combat.

Often, the only real enemies the grunts encountered at their camps were vermin. Rats thrived in the filth of the battlefield. Insects were a problem as well, including malaria-spreading mosquitoes and biting, stinging ants. By far the most hated insects were leeches.

When they encountered local Vietnamese people, one of the great challenges soldiers dealt with was how to figure out who posed a threat and who didn't. The VC, by their nature as guerrillas, attempted to blend in with the people and avoid detection whenever possible. There was always an undercurrent of tension over the fact that nearly anyone could be an insurgent.

American combat soldiers were generally trained to fight and win conventional battles. They received little instruction on how to immerse themselves in the country, speak its language, learn its customs, or function as soldier-diplomats, even though these skills were arguably more useful to combat an insurgency than conventional fighting.

11

THE WORLD OF THE VIETNAMESE COMBAT SOLDIER

This lecture provides a look at the worlds of the Vietnamese combat soldiers—from both the north and south—as they struggled for the future of their country. It begins with the communists, who over two decades would mobilize millions to carry out the objective of unifying the country under Hanoi's control, and then shifts to the other side.

THE PEOPLE'S ARMY OF VIETNAM

Officially, the north's army was known as the People's Army of Vietnam, a name that implied representation of the entire country. During the war, though, this force was known as the North Vietnamese Army, or NVA. Personnel using US radio jargon spoke of them as "Nathaniel Victors."

In the early years of the conflict, North Vietnamese men could be drafted to serve in the NVA between the ages of 18 and 25. But as casualties mounted and recruitment needs became ever higher, the draft was widened. By 1967, it was between 16 and 45, an expansive draft that rendered around

22% of North Vietnam's 18 million people eligible to serve. About 60% of these were considered physically and mentally fit for service, but standards were lowered over time. By mid-1966, the North Vietnamese armed forces totaled half a million military personnel.

About two-thirds of those who served in the NVA were draftees, and almost all were literate. Most came from rural villages along the heavily populated Red River valley. The rest came from Hanoi, Haiphong, and a few smaller cities.

Men with unique technical and educational skills useful for the war effort or the economy were almost always deferred. So were college students, party officials, ethnic Chinese individuals, and members of Vanguard Youth, a volunteer labor organization. And the sons of North Vietnam's political elite frequently used social advantages to avoid service.

A few draftees served in the North Vietnamese air force or navy, or in antiaircraft defense duties. But given the realities of the costly ground war and the constant need to replace combat losses, the vast majority of new recruits were inducted into the front-line units of the NVA.

Throughout the war, the North Vietnamese could earmark an unusually high proportion of soldiers for ground combat service, because China sent more than 300,000 troops of their own to the north to perform logistical and support jobs, freeing up northerners to fight in the south. Recruitment for combat duty was at the heart of the Vietnamese war effort.

THE NVA SOLDIER'S LIFE

Once inducted into the NVA, a new soldier received about three months of basic military training. Some received more specialized training as medics, or in communications, or combat engineering—the latter with a particular emphasis on mines and booby traps. But most became infantrymen.

The typical NVA trainee was subjected to at least two weeks of political indoctrination. Most soldiers committed themselves to the ultimate objective of unifying the country under Hanoi's control, but relatively few thought of themselves as communists, and fewer still were party members.

Initially, the term of enlistment for a soldier was for two years. In 1965, when the ground war expanded dramatically, the government changed the rules. From now on, every NVA soldier was in the war for the duration, in stark contrast to his American enemy who served a fixed tour of duty and then went home.

Most NVA soldiers who completed their training were sent to South Vietnam, almost always via the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Many never came back. Casualty rates were appalling. By one estimate, the communists lost an average of 100,000 soldiers per year, the majority of whom were NVA, from 1965 to 1972.

THE VIET CONG AND COMMUNISTS IN COMMAND

Once in the south, northern recruits either operated as conventional, uniformed combat soldiers or covertly as guerrillas in conjunction with their southern Vietnamese compatriots of the National Liberation Front

(NLF). The communists called the NLF's armed forces the People's Liberation Armed Forces, or PLAF. More commonly, they were known as Viet Cong, or just VC. American radio jargon called for referring to them as "Victor Charlie."

The Viet Cong initially drew its recruits almost entirely from the south, and despite taking its direction from the north, the VC could legitimately claim itself to be a grassroots southern movement on this basis. Yet by the end of the 1960s, northern NVA recruits and soldiers largely filled out the rosters of depleted VC units, and most VC units had a northerner in command.

Two communist military commands existed in Vietnam: the NVA High Command, which directed the northern army; and the Central Office for South Vietnam, or COSVN, which directed the VC armed forces. At every level, however, Communist Party committees and officials supervised all military operations.

The majority of VC guerrillas served in militia-style local force units. They were lightly armed, at best with an AK-47. Their military training was mediocre, they were often illiterate, and they generally operated in small cadres. The local force VC were the bedrock of the southern insurgency, focused on establishing communist control over their home villages and towns, usually in rural areas.

Main force battalions comprised the battle-ready core of the Viet Cong. Main force VC were nearly as well trained and armed as the NVA and served as full-time soldiers. They fought anywhere in South Vietnam, many belonged to the Communist Party, and almost all were literate.

Main force battalions typically had a full-strength complement of 400 to 600 soldiers. Both they and NVA battalions had a consistent organization, consisting of three rifle companies, a headquarters company, a signals platoon, a reconnaissance platoon, a sapper platoon, and a battalion staff.

DRAWN TO INSURGENCY ★ INTERROGATIONS OF VC CAPTIVES SUGGEST A FEW KEY REASONS WHY SOUTHERNERS JOINED THE INSURGENCY. FOREMOST WERE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL FRUSTRATIONS WITH THE DEEP INEQUITIES OF SOUTH VIETNAMESE SOCIETY. THE NORTH REPRESENTED REVOLUTIONARY ANTI-COLONIAL CHANGE. OPPRESSION WAS ALSO A MAJOR FACTOR. THE IRON-FISTED ACTIONS OF THE SAIGON REGIME ULTIMATELY DROVE MANY INTO THE ARMS OF THE VC. EAGER YOUNG MEN SOMETIMES SIGNED UP FOR THE ADVENTURE, WHILE OTHERS WERE PRESSURED INTO JOINING BY THEIR PEERS OR FAMILIES WHO WERE ALREADY TAKING PART. THREATS AND COERCION COULD ALSO BE HIGHLY EFFECTIVE IN THE HANDS OF A GOOD RECRUITER.

HARDSHIPS AND MOTIVATION

NVA and VC troops alike faced incredible hardships and atrocious casualties throughout the war. Yet morale among the communist forces remained high throughout the conflict.

For most Vietnamese, this was a life-and-death struggle for their homeland and independence, while for Americans it could never be more than a foreign war in an unfamiliar land. But organization also played a central role.

Nearly all communist troops, regardless of designation, followed the so-called rule of three: A three-man cell was the bedrock of every NVA and VC unit. They slept together, worked together, and fought together. Usually, they became like family to one another.

After years of fighting and suffering together, these three-man cells would become extremely effective and loyal teams. By comparison, US troops were constantly rotating in and out as their tours started and ended, which tended to undermine unit cohesion and morale over time.

The rule of three went up the chain: Three cells formed a squad, three squads formed a platoon, and so on. Units of any significant size would also have a political officer attached. These were card-carrying party members and hardened revolutionaries who would lecture on communist ideology and the necessity of the struggle. Most soldiers held great respect for their political officers.

And then there were the sessions dedicated to *kiểm thảo*, a Vietnamese abbreviation meaning "verification and discussion." Inspired by Maoist ideology, these meetings were held regularly. At these meetings, the men would be encouraged to share their innermost feelings and concerns as well as critique others and themselves to evaluate their work as a unit.

By nearly all reports, these sessions were extremely effective. Similar to group therapy, they allowed soldiers to provide mutual support, help those who were struggling, and process the psychological horrors of war collectively.

COMMUNIST COMBAT METHODS

One constant of life in the NVA or VC was movement and camouflage. The communist strategy relied on controlling the terms by which it engaged the enemy—only attacking when advantageous and dispersing quickly when they had done so. Extended or unprepared engagements with allied firepower could be devastating.

Reconnaissance units extensively scouted proposed routes and made frequent modifications to avoid enemy surveillance. Soldiers trained to move in total silence, and often at night, making extensive use of vegetation and local terrain to conceal themselves.

Networks consisting of dozens of campsites would be established through a unit's region. Sites were picked that had limited means of approach that could be booby-trapped but also numerous possible escape routes. Some campsites would be located within villages, with local structures serving as part of the defensive perimeter. Once troops departed, all evidence of a campsite was fastidiously concealed.

The relentless cycle of movement and camp preparation took a significant toll. Good physical conditioning was essential, particularly because communist troops often faced inconsistent food supply.

THE ARVN

The north's forces had counterpart opponents in South Vietnam's Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN. At its peak in the early 1970s, it numbered nearly 1 million soldiers.

The ARVN traced its roots to the Vietnamese National Army, a force that had fought in the early 1950s alongside the French against the Viet Minh. When Ngô Đình Diệm established the Republic of Vietnam, some of Diệm's generals wanted the newly reorganized ARVN to focus its training and doctrine on counterinsurgency.

But fresh from the experience of fighting a predominantly conventional war in Korea, American military advisors strongly recommended that the ARVN should mirror US conventional armed forces. The Americans believed that the main threat to Diệm's regime would come from a conventional invasion by North Vietnam, not guerrilla war. Diệm acceded to their wishes. In retrospect, this was a mistake.

The ARVN was also too heavily and intimately involved in South Vietnamese politics. Many officers owed their jobs to political patronage and family connections rather than military acumen. It was ARVN officers who launched the coup that toppled Diệm from power in 1963 and would remain central to the politics of the regime until its demise, and the associated corruption and political violence would forever tarnish the institution's reputation.

Yet the ARVN did the majority of the fighting and dying for the anti-communist side during the war. It suffered nearly a quarter of a million deaths, probably at least twice as many wounded, and untold tens of thousands who became prisoners of war or went missing in action. The ARVN was hardly a hollow puppet army—it did plenty of fighting and was often an effective force.

THE ARVN'S SOLDIERS

Conscription accounted for the bulk of ARVN recruitment. Terms of service usually ranged between two and three years, though some soldiers willingly served for a decade or more. At the height of the war, South Vietnamese men between the ages of 16 and 50 were eligible for the draft.

The typical ARVN soldier was literate and in reasonably good health. Training was uneven, though. Some were superbly prepared for combat—especially those who worked closely with Americans—and could match up against anyone on the communist side. Others left training centers barely knowing how to fire a rifle, much less understanding anything about how to survive in combat.

Because of runaway inflation in South Vietnam, ARVN soldiers were chronically underpaid. Incredibly, they sometimes had to buy their own food, or rely on sustenance from family and friends, or theft or pilferage from villagers. Some dishonest officers even sold unit rations for their own enrichment. ARVN units that stole food or other valuables from people they were supposed to be protecting hardly scored points for the non-communist cause in the countryside.

For much of the war, many ARVN units were equipped with increasingly obsolete Korean War–era M2 carbines, Browning automatic rifles, and Browning .30-caliber machine guns. In spite of this shortcoming, ARVN units often acquitted themselves well against VC and NVA formations, especially when they were supported by artillery and air strikes, as the Americans almost always were.

THE ARVN'S LEADERSHIP AND IMPACT

For the most part, the effectiveness of an ARVN soldier depended on the quality of his officers. Weak, corrupt, cowardly, or ineffectual officers were all too common.

But the ARVN was also blessed with many thousands of innovative, courageous leaders who proved themselves formidable adversaries. Probably the best example is General Ngô Quang Trưởng, an extraordinarily valorous officer and brilliant tactician who defeated communist forces repeatedly in the course of the war.

Indeed, the South Vietnamese won many battles, most notably during the Tet Offensive in 1968, especially at Hue and in Saigon. Another prominent example came in 1972, when the ARVN played a major role in defeating a massive NVA offensive.

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GUNS, GEAR, AND FOOD IN THE VIETNAM WAR

A big part of the soldier's world was their kit. These were the tools and comforts of war—the weapons, food, and equipment that might mean the difference between life and death in Vietnam. This lecture looks at the kits of soldiers from both sides of the Vietnam War.

AMERICAN CLOTHING

A soldier's clothing had to contend with thick mud, jungle, swamps, mountains, and heat. Temperatures in Vietnam often exceeded 90° or even 100°. During the monsoon season, torrential rains could be almost constant. The rain usually made conditions steamier. In the mountains and central highlands, though, it could cool temperatures down into the 50s and 60s, which felt very cold to those who had grown used to the heat.

In the earlier years of the war, most American infantry wore the OG-107, the workhorse fatigues of the US armed forces for nearly four decades. This uniform evolved in response to jungle conditions. A tropical combat variation, made from lighter, fast-drying material, began to appear in 1966. The following year, the distinctive ERDL camouflage pattern was issued

to Special Forces and reconnaissance units, and eventually regular forces, too, though other camouflage patterns and solid colors were still common sights until the end of the war. Later uniforms also removed most of the buttons, which tended to snag on things in the jungle or dig into the skin when lying prone.

The uniform's patrol cap was replaced with the broad-brimmed boonie hat in response to the punishing Vietnamese sun. Heavier head protection came in the form of the trusty M1 helmet.

OG-107 JACKET

CLOTHING OF THE COMMUNIST FORCES

Communist uniforms were a diverse affair, as procurement was not standardized. NVA troops generally wore simple green uniforms of lightweight cotton, but a variety of colors and cuts were common. Viet Cong soldiers often wore civilian-style clothing, most notably loose-fitting black garments. At times, VC soldiers dressed in green or khaki NVA uniforms, especially in remote areas near their base camps where there was no point in concealing their identities.

Communist headgear was diverse as well, ranging from conical hats and cloth caps to pith helmets or round steel helmets, the latter two of which were usually furnished to the NVA.

Perhaps the biggest quality difference between the two sides was footwear. The NVA issued canvas boots from China, but these were nowhere near as hardy in the harsh jungles and craggy mountains as proper American boots were, and they wore down quickly.

HEAVY AND LIGHT GEAR

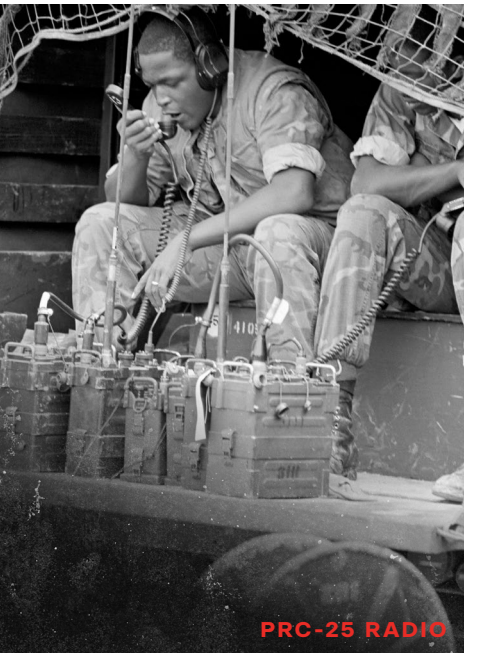
When it came to the rest of their kit, there were stark differences in philosophy between the US and North Vietnam. The average American soldier carried between 60 and 70 pounds on his person. On top of their primary weapon, they carried sidearms, ammunition, grenades, mines, trip flares, knives, canteens, rations, a mess kit, bedding, spare clothing, netting, ponchos, various tools, insect repellent, survival kits, a gas mask, and personal effects. All of this was carried in a heavy-duty rucksack and numerous pouches, belts, and slings. Waterproofing all this against the rain and humidity was a constant battle, and water seemed to make its way into even the hardiest of rucksacks.

By contrast, the constant mobility of communist troops necessitated an entirely different approach. The beleaguered communist logistical operation had to focus on just getting recruits, guns, and ammunition down the Hồ Chí Minh trail; items like bedding and spare clothes were luxuries they could ill afford to regularly supply.

NVA troops were somewhat better supplied and had more elaborate packs and larger ammunition stores. However, local force VC soldiers might carry little more than their rifle, ammunition, a knife, a canteen, and perhaps a day's food.

An entrenching tool, usually a small shovel five to six inches in width, was the one heavy noncombat item most NVA and main force VC soldiers could not go without. The communists were veritable diggers, using terrain to conceal themselves, make camps, set booby traps, store food, create stoves, hide caches, dig tunnels, and construct basic earthen defenses against artillery or air strikes.

COMMUNICATIONS EQUIPMENT


PRC-25 RADIO

Another stark difference between allied and communist forces was in communications equipment. The Americans and ARVN units enjoyed the latest technology in this respect. Most radio telephone operators, or RTOs, were saddled with the PRC-25 radio —a 24-pound backpack-style VHF radiotelephone.

The communist world generally lagged in electronics technology, so their radios were not nearly as advanced as their American counterparts. The most common Chinese-made Type 71 and 102E radios did the job but were very bulky, weighing between 45 and 100 pounds. They were in very short supply.

The principal means of communicating, especially at the squad, platoon, and company level, was through runners and couriers, who transmitted both verbal and written messages. Local force Viet Cong were essential in this respect. They often co-opted women, children, and old men in their area who could pass messages along in a chain or leave them at dead drops. NVA and VC units might also use whistles, lights, or gunshots to communicate basic messages.

ALLIED FORCES' WEAPONS

The defining element of any soldier's kit, and almost what defined his role as a soldier, was the weapon he carried. In the early years, American marines and a few other servicemen were armed with the M14, a semiautomatic wooden stock rifle that fired 7.62-millimeter bullets from a 20-round box magazine. This weapon was durable but heavy.

Far more commonly, Americans in Vietnam were armed with the M16A1, a new assault rifle made of nylon that weighed only seven pounds. The M16 fired light 5.56-millimeter bullets from a 20-round box magazine and quickly became a mainstay of modern weaponry, still widely in use around the world today.

Despite its strengths, the M16 was far from the perfect weapon in Vietnam. First, the bullet would often tumble once it contacted foliage, degrading its accuracy. Second, the M16 was initially issued to soldiers without proper cleaning equipment. Carbon buildup in the breach caused the rifle to jam. Eventually, cleaning equipment became readily available, and M16s were fitted with chrome jackets on the breach that minimized carbon buildup, improving their reliability and ease of use.

The heavy firepower of any American squad was the M60 machine gun, a powerful, sturdy weapon that could fire so rapidly and thus consumed so much ammunition that it became known affectionately as the pig. Firing 7.62-millimeter bullets, an M60 could be fired from a bipod or a tripod, or even from the hip.

The typical American grenade was the M26A2, a deadly fragmentation weapon with a 4.5-second fuse that weighed only a pound and thus could be carried easily in large quantities. American soldiers also usually carried at least one antipersonnel, command-detonated claymore mine apiece.

Then there was the M79 grenade launcher, unique to the Vietnam War, which looked like a sawed-off shotgun. It could fire a 40-millimeter grenade quite accurately up to 300 yards away.

ARVN soldiers were also the beneficiaries of this new generation of sophisticated weaponry. In the early years, the Americans supplied their South Vietnamese allies with hundreds of thousands of their phased-out M1 and M2 carbines. Lightweight, easy to handle, and reliable, these rifles were extremely popular among Vietnamese soldiers on both sides. They were often found on Viet Cong troops as well, having been captured or stolen.

WEAPONS OF THE COMMUNIST FORCES

On the communist side, apart from those weapons they captured, the typical NVA or VC main force soldier carried a Soviet-made AK-47 or its mass-produced Chinese copy, the Type 56. A versatile, rugged automatic rifle weighing about 11 pounds, the AK-47 is arguably the most successful military firearm of the post–World War II era. It fired a sturdy 7.62-millimeter bullet and featured a sizable 30-round banana clip.

Though it lacked the range and accuracy of the M16, this mattered little in close-quarters jungle combat, and the AK-47 allowed communist soldiers to spray a great deal of lethal firepower in mere seconds to an effective range of about 350 yards. In keeping with Soviet design doctrine, the AK-47 is extremely simple, making it cheap to manufacture and hard to break, even if poorly maintained and used in hot and humid conditions.

Some communists were equipped with the SKS, a semiautomatic carbine that was a little lighter and somewhat more accurate.

Tpically, NVA or VC squads carried either an RPD light machine gun, a drum-fed weapon that weighed about 16 pounds and could fire 150 rounds a minute, or the DP, a heavier, longer, also drum-fed gun with an effective range of just above 800 yards. These weapons were favored since they all used 7.62-millimeter ammunition. Lacking the sophisticated supply and logistics capacity of the Americans, the communist forces needed their ammunition to be cheap, easily available, and interchangeable between weapons.

Additionally, communist soldiers were often armed with shoulder-fired rocket-propelled grenades, generally either the RPG-2 or RPG-7. An RPG could destroy a bunker, penetrate the armor of an American M113 armored personnel carrier, or just spray infantrymen with fragments from the rocket's warhead and assorted detritus.

When it came to grenades and other explosive ordnance, the VC and NVA sported an incredible diversity, which were used extensively in its sapping and booby-trapping tactics. Grenades of all shapes and sizes filtered in from the Soviet Union, China, and the rest of the communist world, and in the later years of the war, Soviet or Chinese-made antipersonnel mines did too. Domestically made alternatives also proliferated, especially among the Viet Cong. Their jungle workshops became adept at defusing and opening unexploded bombs and artillery shells to recycle the explosives and refill them.

FOOD

Food was a big part of the soldier's world and often evokes some of the most visceral memories. For American soldiers in Vietnam, during most of their time in the field, they ate the meal, combat, individual ration, or

MCI. Nearly everyone referred to them as C rations, their WWII-era name. These were prepackaged, canned, hypercaloric food items designed to minimize bowel movements while providing maximum nutrition.

Soldiers often used small pieces of plastic explosive to heat up their rations and provide themselves with some semblance of a hot meal. C rations came with a variety of menu options, including franks and beans, spaghetti and meatballs, turkey loaf, and—the most hated of all—ham and lima beans.

When the tactical situation permitted, more substantial food was brought by helicopter to combat units in the field. Huge, insulated containers of beef, turkey, chicken, mashed potatoes, pie, salad, and other foods could be dropped to the soldiers.

Every so often, infantry units rotated back to firebases or base camps, either for guard duty or rest. Here, they had access to mess halls with three meals a day of hot food, though the ubiquity of powdered eggs and potatoes made it more akin to a mediocre cafeteria than home cooking.

Units could also congregate for barbecues and grill hot dogs, hamburgers, or ribs. These gatherings of food and comradeship accounted for some of the good times in Vietnam. But there was one downside, unique to the grunts: If a soldier had been in the field long enough, and eating just C rations, his stomach shrank. When he came back to base and ate the rich cookout food, he would experience terrible cramps and likely diarrhea.

Food was a vastly different experience for NVA and VC soldiers. The communist logistical operation was far more basic than its allied counterpart. The vast majority of food had to be locally sourced by the VC and NVA themselves.

The basic staple that every communist soldier ate was rice. Calorific and hardy, it was grown just about everywhere in the countryside. In mountainous areas where rice was scarcer, sweet potatoes and manioc acted as supplements.

Procuring and distributing rice was thus a crucial part of VC operations. In areas they controlled, farms were taxed in rice at harvest time. Additional so-called fund drives, sometimes at gunpoint, would be held at other times of the year if needs were acute.

Other villages might be subjected to pot taxes, where for every meal they served, a handful of rice had to be set aside to be collected by the VC. Non-farmers could be sent to towns and regional markets to procure food. Some VC and NVA units even established their own farms in remote jungle fields to supply themselves.

And despite efforts to clamp down on it, communist forces could also obtain significant quantities of food on the black market, which thrived during the war in the south. Rice and flour supplied by American aid programs to South Vietnam often made their way into the hands of the insurgents on the black market via corrupt officials.

The key challenge for combat troops was not actually obtaining the rice but preparing it. Rice takes about 20 minutes to cook, but the flames and smoke from cooking fires could easily give away a unit's position and had to be used sparingly.

Rice, especially if poorly cooked, made for a bland meal, but it could be offset somewhat by seasonings. Most popular was nước mắm, fermented Vietnamese fish sauce, treasured by soldiers on both sides and still ubiquitous in Vietnamese cuisine today.

Most units quickly became adept at hunting and foraging, as this was the easiest way to supplement their diet. Fish were plentiful across Vietnam's rivers and lakes and could be dried to extend shelf life. Snakes, deer, rats, iguanas, monkeys, and even elephants and tigers could be hunted or trapped in the jungle and added to a meal. Fruits, roots, and vegetables could also be foraged.

Denying food supplies to the communists was frequently a goal of American and South Vietnamese operations. But while food supply was a constant challenge for the communists, on the whole, they ate sufficiently.

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FALSE OPTIMISM, FAILING STRATEGIES, 1966–1967

By 1966, the United States was rapidly increasing its presence in Vietnam. More than 385,000 Americans would be serving there by year's end. Nearly three-quarters of a million ARVN troops and some 50,000 from other allied nations added to that. On paper, anti-communist forces dwarfed their enemies in the field, yet the allies were trying to find and destroy a largely invisible enemy. Around 300,000 Viet Cong and NVA were estimated to have infiltrated the south, with thousands more arriving every month. And while the Americans had shored up key cities and strongholds, vast areas of South Vietnam remained effectively hostile territory.

THE I CORPS REGION

As of mid-1966, the I Corps region was by far the most dangerous and fiercely contested. In fact, Quang Tri, Thua Thien, and Quang Nam, the three provinces closest to North Vietnam, accounted for 40% of American fatalities during the war.

Many of the rural areas and outlying villages were dominated by the VC or NVA. Rugged mountains, steep hills, deep gorges, and triple-canopy jungle characterized much of this region.

About one-third of MACV's combat power was located in I Corps. Allied units conducted constant patrols and sweeps. The majority of these resulted in no contact, though booby traps were a persistent, horrifying hazard.

Occasionally, patrolling troops got into fights in or near VC-controlled villages. The communist forces would wait until the soldiers were close, shoot at them, and pin them down. In most cases, a one-day battle would ensue. American artillery and air strikes were employed liberally, killing VC or NVA personnel as well as villagers.

The heaviest fighting raged near the demilitarized zone, or DMZ, that divided North and South Vietnam. Guerrillas played little role here. Here, it was largely conventional warfare between the NVA and the Americans. Both sides hurled thousands of artillery shells back and forth.

US marines constructed a series of hard-pressed firebases from Gio Linh and Dong Ha in the east all the way along the DMZ to Con Thien, Camp Carroll, Cam Lo, and then Khe Sanh in the west, on the Laotian border. These places were under almost constant shelling or threat of NVA attack.

A TROUBLING SITUATION

The violence along the DMZ was such that commanders rotated units in and out of these bases, lest they be completely destroyed or the men incapacitated by physical fatigue and battle stress. The leader of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, aimed to reverse the troubling situation in the northern provinces.

Westmoreland's strategy to win the war hinged on big-unit operations that would inflict heavy casualties on the enemy. In early 1966, Westmoreland sought to execute this strategy in the province of Binh Dinh.

Two NVA regiments had entered this area, made common cause with a Viet Cong main force regiment, and established a powerful shadow government infrastructure that brought much of the population, and this vital source of food production, under communist control.

Westmoreland ordered Major General Harry Kinnard's 1st Cavalry Division to clear the VC out of Binh Dinh. Equipped with 400 helicopters, the 1st Cavalry possessed a lethal blend of firepower and mobility. In late January 1966, Kinnard and his staff developed Operation Masher/White Wing, the largest search-and-destroy mission yet attempted in Vietnam. For six weeks, from January 25 to March 6, the 1st Cavalry's helicopter units flew 73,000 sorties, ferrying more than 93,000 troopers back and forth into the combat zones. At several landing zones, the VC resistance was both ferocious and tenacious.

In other operational areas, the Americans searched fruitlessly for the enemy. There were occasional, brief firefights followed by pursuit, usually in vain, of rapidly retreating VC formations. Amidst this, they had to manage thousands of refugees who were uprooted from their homes by the operation.

By the time Kinnard declared an end to Masher/White Wing on March 6, his forces had suffered an average of 25 casualties, including 5 fatalities, per day. VC casualties were estimated to be between 1,300 and 3,000. Undoubtedly, a hard blow had been struck against the communists when the Americans had actually found them. But body counts were hard to verify and sometimes inflated because commanders were evaluated primarily on these numbers.

Within a couple of weeks, the VC and NVA had re-infiltrated Binh Dinh, necessitating yet more operations in 1966 and beyond to deal with them, which characterized the struggle for South Vietnam as a whole. Throughout 1966 and 1967, the Americans and their allies launched a dizzying array of similar operations. The pattern and the results of these operations were similar to Masher/White Wing.

STALEMATE

After two years of the American buildup, the war was grinding to a stalemate. By the spring of 1967, President Lyndon Johnson had to admit that his policy of gradual escalation had not worked. As American military power in Vietnam grew, he had hoped the communists might be motivated to come to the negotiating table. Instead, the war had only expanded and become more destructive.

His administration was divided over what to do next. Secretary of State Dean Rusk and National Security Advisors Walt Rostow and McGeorge Bundy wanted to stay the course and keep escalating. But Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, an original architect of the war, was becoming increasingly disillusioned.

The administration's ambivalence reflected disagreements over the war that had now begun to divide the American people. Casualties in Vietnam were rapidly mounting. For instance, 11,000 American soldiers were killed in 1967, more than all the previous years of American involvement combined. Draft calls were now exceeding 30,000 men per month. The cost of the war was spiraling, to the point where Johnson called for a 10% surtax to help pay for it.

An increasingly prominent strand of antiwar opposition, known as doves, were demanding an immediate end to the war, either for moral reasons, or because it was unwinnable, or because winning was not worth the price the US was paying in lives and treasure. Protestors picketed outside the White House.

By contrast, the so-called hawks believed it would be dishonorable and catastrophic to abandon South Vietnam. They favored the continuation of the war to ultimate victory, whatever the cost.

The president faced unenviable choices. He could de-escalate, pursue peace on communist terms, turn the war entirely over to the South Vietnamese, and then almost certainly watch them be defeated. Or he could increase American troop levels in Southeast Asia and risk provoking a wider war with China and the Soviet Union. Alternatively, he could continue with his incremental, limited war and hope for the best.

A REQUEST FOR MORE FORCES

In April 1967, General Westmoreland flew to Washington to meet with the president. He and the Joint Chiefs favored some variation of escalation. Air force leaders wanted to expand Rolling Thunder to destroy North Vietnam's communications and transportation network, even at the risk of inflicting substantial civilian casualties. Westmoreland wanted to add to this an expanded ground war. He asked the president for 200,000 more troops, some mobilization of military reservists, limited ground invasions of Laos and Cambodia, and even a quick operation into North Vietnam itself.

Johnson was skeptical of the general's escalation plan, though, sensing correctly that Westmoreland was unduly optimistic about reaching the crossover point. "When we add divisions, can't the enemy add divisions?" he asked pointedly.

Instead, he decided he would not abandon South Vietnam, nor would he embrace a dramatic escalation. He approved a more measured increase of 55,000 troops and expanded the bombing campaign against North Vietnam, but not as much as the Joint Chiefs had wanted.

HANOI'S ESCALATION

In Hanoi, General Secretary Lê Duẩn and the North Vietnamese were facing their own tough choices. The communists were now enmeshed in a bloody struggle, with untold numbers of NVA and VC dying each day, while American bombs rained down on the north. Unlike Johnson, though, Lê Duẩn did not have to worry much about public opinion in a country tightly controlled by the party. Instead, he maintained supremacy by purging and even incarcerating any government or party officials who threatened his power or dissented too loudly.

Eerily similar to Westmoreland and other hawks on the American side, in mid-1967, Lê Duẩn felt that the time was ripe to win the war by unleashing a knockout blow on the enemy. He and his allies conceived of a major offensive across the south designed to foment an uprising to topple the Saigon government, believing that the South Vietnamese people were itching to rid themselves of the American imperialists and their puppet regime.

The plan for an all-out assault to topple the supposedly teetering south was drawn up by General Nguyễn Chí Thanh, then a leading military strategist and Viet Cong commander. It called for NVA units to first amass in the border areas along the DMZ, drawing American troops away from populated areas. At the same time, guerrillas would move in clandestine fashion into every province and district capital and even Saigon, where they would await orders to strike at the ARVN and other government forces. The element of surprise was key. The offensive was to be timed to coincide with Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, the country's biggest holiday, in early 1968.

The scale and boldness of the planned offensive provoked opposition from moderates in the politburo, including Hồ Chí Minh and Defense Minister Võ Nguyên Giáp. However, Lê Duẩn was merciless in ostracizing his opposition and bullying the politburo to endorse the Tet Offensive. And critically, an aging Hồ, now in his final years, had become increasingly desperate to see Vietnam united in his lifetime. Ultimately, he gave his symbolically important blessing to the plan.

BUILDUP TO THE TET OFFENSIVE

The NVA began its preparations for the Tet Offensive in late 1967, building up its troops along the DMZ and border provinces. The so-called border battles broke out as the NVA sought to draw allied forces away from population centers and take control of key routes into the south.

One of the most protracted broke out at Khe Sanh, located just six miles east of Laos, astride a key NVA infiltration and supply route. Throughout 1967, marines fought ferociously to control the area's critical high ground, with nearly 200 killed and 700 wounded in the process.

The Americans managed to hold onto the Khe Sanh base and high ground. But by the end of September, the NVA had secured nearby Route 9 and had moved two divisions into the area. Khe Sanh was now surrounded and under siege.

In the meantime, other NVA regiments began moving into the rugged border areas of the central highlands in II Corps. MACV analysts immediately detected their presence around Dak To, and Westmoreland's headquarters began moving soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division and the 173rd Airborne Brigade into the area in hopes of luring the NVA into a showdown battle.

The remoteness of the region and the forbidding nature of the terrain partially negated American firepower and material advantages. Additionally, the NVA controlled most of these border areas, so they had plenty of time to fortify the ubiquitous hills of the region with well-sited bunkers and tunnels.

HILL 875

On this inhospitable stretch of terrain, some of the war's most ferocious battles raged throughout November 1967 for control of the high ground. One of most desperate was for Hill 875, close to the Cambodian border and the town of Dak To. Here, the NVA cut off the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment as they were ascending the hill, initiating a battle of unique desperation and intensity. The paratroopers were caught between enemy soldiers, who were hunkered down in bunkers on the slope before them, and other NVA who had circled in behind them at the base of the hill.

They might have been overrun and annihilated if not for the self-sacrificial valor of PFC Carlos Lozada. As NVA soldiers attacked, Lozada unleashed heavy fire from his M60 machine gun, giving time for his comrades to retreat and take cover farther up the hill. Eventually an enemy bullet hit him in the head, killing him instantly. For his actions, Lozada received a posthumous Medal of Honor. So did Major Charles Watters, the battalion's Catholic chaplain who courageously dragged untold numbers of wounded men to safety and kept their spirits up. Tragically, Watters and at least 42 other paratroopers were killed when an American plane mistakenly dropped a bomb right into the American-controlled perimeter on Hill 875. It was the worst friendly fire incident of the Vietnam War.

The skill and courage of the troopers and assistance from more accurate friendly air strikes managed to keep the enemy at bay. And with the help of reinforcements, Hill 875 was secured on Thanksgiving Day, and the NVA fell back across the border. But the place was a bloody mess.

Helicopters evacuated the wounded and the remnants of the American dead. Despite the cost of the battle, American commanders could hardly stay to hold the bloody hills of Dak To. The hills were located deep inside hostile country at the edge of a perilous supply line, and they had no intrinsic value beyond the NVA's presence there.

Understandably, many of those who had bled and lost friends to take Hill 875 remained bitter about this for the rest of their lives. Within a week, the NVA was back on the hill, rebuilding their bunkers.

CONCLUSION

As the fighting raged on the borders, the Johnson administration was carrying out a public relations campaign to bolster sagging public confidence and restore faith in his war leadership. The crown jewel of this effort was Westmoreland himself, who came home in November and made several public appearances expressing his usual optimism.

Some American commanders, though, were starting to question Westmoreland's strategy. One early skeptic was Lieutenant General Frederick Weyand, commander of the II Field Force. In late 1967, he was quoted anonymously in *The New York Times* as saying, "I've chased main-force units all over the country, and the impact was zilch." It was one of the first articles to raise the prospect of a stalemate in Vietnam. There would be many more in its wake.

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HOW TO FIGHT AN ASYMMETRIC WAR

The decades-long conflict in Vietnam is a classic example of asymmetric warfare—a type of war where the military power and tactics of the opposing sides are vastly different. The communists could never hope to match the sophistication or firepower of the French, American, or American-supplied South Vietnamese militaries. But the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army were resourceful in developing tactics that could help their units impose maximum damage on their opponents while still providing options for the bulk of communist forces to escape and live to fight another day.

CONTROLLING THE INITIATIVE

The first principle of the entire communist strategy hinged on controlling when, where, and how they engaged their enemy. The extreme mobility of the communist soldier was crucial for this. As much as possible, the VC and NVA had to avoid being caught by allied units looking for them. In this respect, they were remarkably successful. One US military study found that nearly 90% of all engagements with US forces were initiated by the enemy.

But when they were found, the communist doctrine was to try to delay the opposing forces and exact maximum damage on the attacker while withdrawing as quickly and safely as possible. To aid in this, VC and NVA units were methodical in their defensive preparations wherever they went.

They always used terrain, including caves, cliffs, hills, and boulders that offered cover or high ground. Yet beyond that, the communists were industrious diggers and nearly always dug out double-layered networks of trenches, bunkers, and defensive lines to support their positions, usually well camouflaged from both the ground and the air by vegetation.

One of the most extensively used, and difficult to detect, communist defense structures were one-man foxholes, sometimes called spider holes, which were dug directly down into the earth and covered with leaves or other camouflage with just a small

gap for observation. These were hard to spot, particularly in areas of thick vegetation, and it could be very difficult to dislodge a determined soldier from any hole.

Making dislodgement from such entrenchments even harder was the communist tactic known as hugging the belt. Should their location be approached, or when executing an ambush, VC and NVA troops would often wait in their defensive positions as long as possible before opening fire and revealing themselves. This created surprise and confusion, and their proximity also meant that artillery, grenade launchers, and air support became very risky for the allies to use, for fear of hitting their own troops.

Moreover, any VC or NVA position would contain carefully planned routes of withdrawal. This meant that while some troops engaged the allied forces in intense, close-quarters fighting, the bulk of their unit would be able to escape.

AMBUSHES AND TRAPS

Ambushes were one of the most favored offensive tactics of the VC and NVA. Foxholes, trenches, and other defensive positions would be created across a roadway, all meticulously concealed. Ambushes were often conducted just before dark, allowing the ambushers to strike hard and fast, inflict maximum casualties, and, before the enemy had time to recover, withdraw under the cover of the falling night.

Though many ambushes were executed on a smaller scale, occasionally the opportunities for larger ambushes presented themselves. In October 1967, one of the largest of the war occurred at the Battle of Ong Thanh, when the VC ambushed two companies of the 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment. More than 80% of those ambushed were killed or wounded before the VC withdrew with minimal casualties. The battle cost the life of Lieutenant Colonel Terry Allen Jr., son of a prominent World War II general.

Another much-feared surprise that could await allied forces was booby traps. Many young Americans lost legs, arms, or eyes—or more—to concealed explosives. Indeed, about 20% of American casualties in the war were inflicted by mines or booby traps.

Mines, both makeshift and mass-manufactured, were used extensively by the communists. Another infamous hazard was the punji stick. These were simple spikes made of sharpened wood and hidden in holes. Sometimes larger pits would be dug, into which a soldier might fall and impale himself, but even just a single stake in a small hidden hole could pierce a soldier's foot.

Though they usually did not inflict a fatal wound, a soldier would be debilitated nonetheless, and the unit slowed while they were treated or evacuated. And spikes were sometimes coated with feces, which could cause life-threatening infections if left untreated.

AMERICAN RESPONSES

The Americans did have many advantages at their disposal. Close air support, or CAS, was perhaps the most critical advantage they enjoyed. Heavily armed gunships, like the fixed-wing AC-47 and AC-119, as well as helicopters like the Bell UH-1, could strafe enemy positions from the air with devastating firepower. B-52s and other strategic bombers could also be deployed in tactical roles, carpet-bombing the battlefield to break up the terrain and blow apart enemy trenches and bunkers.

Most terrifying of all, though, was napalm. Napalm is created by mixing various thickening agents and gasoline. The result is a gooey, viscous gel that can stick to targets and disperse widely in the air. It also burns slower and hotter than regular gasoline—more than 2,000° Fahrenheit in the right conditions. Napalm is a devastatingly effective weapon against an entrenched enemy.

Both the French and then the Americans used napalm in Vietnam, most often dropped from the skies in close air-support missions to clear out communist units that had dug themselves in. Napalm was also adapted for use by ground units. To mitigate the obvious danger to operators of handheld flamethrowers, riverboats and tanks like the M67 were later adapted for this purpose. These weapons were psychological as much as physical.

HEAVY COSTS

Without their own air support in the field, there wasn't much the VC and NVA could do in the face of bullets, bombs, or fire showering from the air. However, while very effective, allied air support was also a blunt instrument of destruction, and inevitably, civilians got killed or hurt unintentionally in the crossfire.

Another major offender was the American artillery practice of harassment and interdiction, or H & I. These actions involved firing explosive rounds at random intervals, in most cases blindly and during the night, onto suspected enemy routes of movement like roads and rivers.

Most often, nothing was hit. Very occasionally, an unlucky VC or NVA unit would get shelled. But H & I fire often proved more perilous to bystanders than to the communists. Still, H & I wouldn't be phased out entirely until 1970.

The communists often tried to lure the Americans into firefights in populated areas, in hopes that the destructiveness of their weapons might anger locals enough to turn them against the US and ARVN. And in that way, they were sometimes able to turn America's massive firepower to their own advantage.

That's not to say the allies operated obliviously, and indeed, American military personnel often behaved with incredible compassion and humanity. They dispensed medical care and money with impunity. If a civilian got hurt by American H & I fire, they were just as likely to be saved by American medical personnel.

And American combat units could also provide ordinary Vietnamese protection from the depredations of northern forces. The VC and NVA presented themselves as liberators and would often engage in land reform and local development that improved the lot of the South Vietnamese peasantry. But when the situation demanded, these same civilians could be cynically exploited as human shields against allied attacks and forced into service as laborers or recruits.

CIVILIANS' DESIRES ★ IN THE END, MOST CIVILIANS JUST WANTED TO BE LEFT ALONE AND LIVE THEIR LIVES IN PEACE, AND THEY TENDED TO GRAVITATE TO WHICHEVER SIDE COULD PROVIDE THEM WITH SECURITY. YET AMERICAN OR EVEN ARVN-PROVIDED SECURITY WAS OFTEN FLEETING. THE VC WAS A DEEP ORGANIZATION THAT LIVED RIGHT AMONG THE VILLAGES AND FARMS.

DEFOLIANTS

Perhaps the most controversial of all the weapons the Americans deployed to counteract the tactics of the VC and NVA were chemical defoliants. In an attempt to counteract the communist units' use of vegetation as cover, the US Air Force began Operation Ranch Hand, which sprayed more than 18 million gallons of chemical herbicides over South Vietnam and Laos from 1962 to 1971. The most famous chemicals sprayed were the so-called rainbow herbicides, including Agents Orange, Pink, Purple, and White. They were frighteningly effective.

Using specially modified Fairchild C-123s, the Americans could spray a section of land about 10 miles long and 300 feet wide at a time. Within a couple of weeks, a sprayed area's trees would drop their leaves and would remain bare until the next rainy season. In dense jungles and forests, about 10% of mature trees would die altogether, and the percentage increased for trees sprayed multiple times. Smaller trees, like mangroves, died even more readily.

Annual crops like rice, though, were the most susceptible, and whole paddies of this critical staple could be killed off by Agent Blue and made unsuitable for further planting. Ranch Hand was profoundly unpopular among the rural population the South Vietnamese were supposed to be winning over. And the VC were not significantly affected, as they could simply confiscate what remaining food there was from farmers.

Reflecting this, from 1965 onward, Ranch Hand's emphasis shifted to defoliation of Vietnam and Laos's jungles to support interdiction of the Hồ Chí Minh trail. The long-term effects of herbicides were little understood

when the program began. But Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which first drew widespread attention to the dangers of DDT, was published in 1962, and scientific and public opposition to indiscriminate use of chemicals grew rapidly in the subsequent years.

Eventually, Operation Ranch Hand was shut down in 1971. Estimates of the long-term health damage caused by chemical spraying in Vietnam have varied, but the Vietnamese government believes herbicides to be responsible for hundreds of thousands of severe birth defects in the years since the war, plus various long-term illnesses.

INTERDICTIONS AT SEA

The Americans and their allies had more success in interdicting supplies on the seas. In the early 1960s, the North Vietnamese had used small boats to move supplies to the Viet Cong. But once the American escalation began, the north could not possibly challenge the power and sophistication of the US Navy. From 1964 onward, a tight blockade was maintained for 1,200 miles, from the 17th parallel that divided the two Vietnams all the way to Cambodia's south coast.

This effort was known as Operation Market Time. Cruisers, destroyers, and smaller craft, including Coast Guard vessels, constantly patrolled the shores. Allied warships also bombarded the North Vietnamese coast. Specially fitted shallow-draft vessels, known as Patrol Craft Fast or, more commonly, Swift Boats, even operated along South Vietnam's riverways.

The war on the water was one in which the communists had little effective response. Operation Market Time was so effective that the north soon ceased any attempts to ship supplies by sea. Similarly, river patrols were a relative bright spot in countering the insurgency in South Vietnam.

TUNNELING

While keeping their forces nimble and avoiding sustained engagement was the best way to avoid getting pummeled by American firepower, not all communist operations could be easily moved. Hospitals, food and supply caches, command posts, and communications hubs were difficult and

disruptive to evacuate. It was a challenge to operate these necessities close to the action and yet remain elusive to the allies. One solution was tunneling, and veritable warrens of tunnels were dug by the communists throughout the south.

The largest and most infamous was the Cu Chi tunnel complex. About 20 miles northwest of Saigon, it was part of an area called the Iron Triangle, which had been used since the days of the Viet Minh as a base of operations against the capital. The slowly expanding tunnel complex here had allowed guerrillas to hide from the French and Japanese forces and reemerge to fight again.

After partition, the Iron Triangle still operated, now becoming the largest southern base of operations against the Diệm regime. Slowly but surely, the Cu Chi complex expanded to some 200 miles of tunnels. Life in the tunnels was miserable, owing to poor ventilation, disease, and vermin.

Cu Chi and other complexes were major thorns in the side of South Vietnam, and the allies made repeated efforts to eliminate them. The Iron Triangle alone was raked over several times, most extensively during Operation Cedar Falls in January 1967, when nearly 30,000 troops were sent to obliterate it once and for all.

US and ARVN forces bulldozed nearly all the vegetation from the region and used chemicals to contaminate the rice paddies. The civilian population of nearly 6,000 was forcibly relocated to other areas, and their old homes and villages were burned down. The VC chose to evade their enemies rather than defend the tunnels.

Operation Cedar Falls was a clear example of the core failings of the allied strategy. From a tactical standpoint, the operation was a nominal success—overwhelming force had obliterated the Iron Triangle and forced the VC out. Yet within just 10 days, a US report noted that the Viet Cong once again had a large presence in the Iron Triangle. Moreover, the forcible relocation and home destruction of thousands of people dramatically diminished what support there was among the local population for the Saigon regime.

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THE TET OFFENSIVE, 1968

Early on January 31, 1968, a specially trained squad of 19 Viet Cong sappers blew a hole in the retaining wall surrounding the US embassy compound in Saigon. The assault on the embassy was the beginning of the Tet Offensive, one of the largest and most complex campaigns of the entire Vietnam War.

THE TET OFFENSIVE COINCIDED WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THE LUNAR NEW YEAR, KNOWN COLLOQUIALLY AS TET.

BACKGROUND ON THE OFFENSIVE

The Tet Offensive was the culmination of months of planning. Since mid-1967, North Vietnamese Army formations had been massing in the border areas and driving toward outlying towns and bases, luring American combat units away from the population centers to fight pitched battles for remote, heavily fortified hilltops.


GENERAL HOÀNG VĂN THÁI

At the same time, a surge of Viet Cong guerrilla operatives had infiltrated into the populated strongholds of the South Vietnamese government. For months they lay low, amassing clandestine weaponry and gathering intelligence as they prepared to attack specific targets. In a sign of the offensive's scale and ambition, General Hoàng Văn Thái was also infiltrated to oversee its operations; he was the highest-ranking NVA officer to serve in South Vietnam.

The Tet Offensive is often remembered as a tremendous surprise, almost analogous to the Battle of the Bulge or Pearl Harbor. Yet for months leading up to the January 30 launch date, US intelligence had sensed the movements, infiltration, and massing of troops that hinted at the coming fury.

Lieutenant General Frederick Weyand, commander of ground forces around Saigon, was probably the first to piece everything together. On January 10, he met with General William Westmoreland, the US commander in Vietnam, and persuaded him to pull American forces back from the border areas to defend Saigon. Weyand correctly suspected that the communists were poised to launch a major offensive in the cities, but even he would be surprised at the scale of assaults that were about to erupt.

LAUNCHING THE OFFENSIVE

On January 30 and 31, the communists struck. “Crack the sky, shake the earth” was the message sent out from Hanoi to signal the attack. Some 84,000 communist soldiers launched assaults in 36 of the south’s 44 provincial capitals and 64 of the 245 district capitals. They struck American bases all over the country, including the US Army’s Vietnam headquarters at Long Binh Post and the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam headquarters at Tan Son Nhut, both just outside of Saigon. At the 17th parallel, they surged across the demilitarized zone too. Fighting was heaviest in the cities of Saigon and Hue, and at the American firebase at Khe Sanh.

THE ROLE OF KHE SANH

Khe Sanh, a marine combat base located in remote hill country near the Laotian border, had been under siege by the NVA since late 1967. A renewed assault on the base began with the Tet Offensive. Holding Khe Sanh had become an obsession for General Westmoreland, who believed it to be of vital strategic importance, both as the western anchor for the northern border defenses and as a base of operations for an eventual invasion of Laos to cut the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Westmoreland repeatedly reinforced Khe Sanh.

As the long-running siege drew more and more attention, Johnson began to fear that if the communists overran Khe Sanh, it would inflict a devastating political defeat upon the Americans. He made every member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff personally promise him that Khe Sanh would be held.

The base’s garrison consisted of about 6,000 marines. Half of them were deployed inside the main perimeter. The rest were sprinkled among the hills that brooded over the base. Whoever controlled those hills controlled Khe Sanh, and both sides knew it. The fighting for this high ground was ferocious.

In the skies above, Westmoreland initiated Operation Niagara. B-52 bombers blanketed nearly 100,000 tons of ordnance over NVA-held areas. Marine artillery and fighter-bombers added to the carnage.

Still the communists persisted. Allied intelligence detected the presence of at least three enemy infantry divisions around Khe Sanh. Eventually, as the fighting peaked, the Americans braced themselves for an all-out attack on the base. But it never happened. Instead, the NVA gradually melted away. The marines held Khe Sanh.

Yet within a few months, the base was abandoned by the Americans anyway, leading many to wonder what it was all for. North Vietnamese defense minister Võ Nguyên Giáp and other communist leaders later claimed that Khe Sanh was only a diversion to keep American troops tied down. But the sheer mass of NVA forces dedicated to this diversion, and the subsequent ferocity of the fighting, suggests otherwise.

THE ROLE OF HUE

About 50 miles to the southeast lay the second major objective of the Tet Offensive, the city of Hue. Northern political leaders were banking on widespread popular uprisings in support of the communists to follow the initial wave of operations. Because Hue was the former seat of Vietnamese emperors, victory there would be highly symbolic. Moreover, the city was considered an ideal target for the campaign because popular discontent was already significant—as a university city and Vietnam's center of Buddhist scholarship, it had been a hotbed of activism against the Saigon government for years.

In the early hours of January 31, a signal flare lit up the night sky, and North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong troops stormed the city from all directions. The 1st Division of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, headquartered in the city, was quickly overwhelmed and forced to withdraw. As the sun rose, the Viet Cong flag fluttered over the Citadel, the iconic fortress in the heart of the city.

Immediately after capturing Hue, NVA commanders went about implementing a new revolutionary government to foment support. Yet no groundswell of popular support was forthcoming.

Undaunted, Viet Cong operatives proceeded with instructions from Hanoi to seize power from so-called enemies of the people and supposedly motivate locals to join their cause. Within days, they were rounding

up anyone they considered politically unreliable: South Vietnamese government officials, religious leaders, property owners, artists, foreigners, and other culturally prominent people, plus many members of their families. Most were never seen alive again. Most historians believe at least 2,500 people lost their lives, and perhaps many more.

As predicted, almost immediately the allies regrouped and counterattacked to retake Hue. Elements of the American 1st Cavalry and 101st Airborne Divisions fought to close access to the city, as marines and ARVN troops fought block by venerable block to snuff out the communist presence and work their way back to the citadel. The fighting raged for most of February.

By March, Hue was back in allied hands, though casualties were heavy on both sides. About 50% of the city was destroyed in the fighting and 77% of the population became homeless.

Far from generating mass popular support for a northern takeover, Hue was now fiercely anti-communist. Moreover, the massacre at Hue was a public relations disaster for the north, striking terror among the southern population at the potential consequences of a communist victory for years to come.

THE ROLE OF SAIGON

Similarly fierce urban combat raged in Saigon, the third major target of the Tet Offensive, where the communists hoped to execute the same strategy intended at Hue. Through the element of surprise, specially trained VC units were to quickly capture six key points across the capital: the presidential palace, the US embassy, Radio Saigon, ARVN headquarters, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, and the Saigon Naval Shipyard. They would also strike the massive Bien Hoa-Long Binh military complex on the edge of the city. Having done so, they would then foment a widespread popular uprising which would topple the South Vietnamese government.

All of the attacks quickly foundered. At the American embassy compound, the sapper squad succeeded in blowing a three-foot hole through the retaining wall, but from the embassy building, American military policemen opened fire, killing the sapper lieutenant and several other men. Instead of overrunning the embassy, the VC sappers were pinned down and slaughtered. The embassy was secured and suffered little damage.

Strictly speaking, the sapper attack was a total failure. However, there was a shock effect to what the sappers did. Media coverage of the embassy attack was confused and fragmentary. Erroneous reports circulated that the VC had overrun the embassy, prompting some Americans to wonder if any place in Vietnam was safe from the enemy.

Radio Saigon was considered the key target for the purposes of starting the uprising, and the VC troops had with them a recorded message from Hồ Chí Minh declaring the liberation of Saigon and inciting the population to rise up against their oppressors. The station was captured, but South Vietnamese troops immediately cut its power, so the message never went out. The ARVN lay siege to the station, and after several hours, the VC forces had perished.

In Cholon, a densely populated western section of Saigon, communist troops did take over some residential neighborhoods. However, because of General Weyand's preparations, he had 53 infantry, armor, and armored cavalry battalions, plus supporting troops, with which to dislodge the communists from Saigon.

The North Vietnamese were unsuccessful in securing any of their military or strategic goals in Saigon, and as in Hue, the population had not risen to support the communist invasion. However, sporadic fighting continued throughout the city for more than a month, causing wide destruction and military and civilian casualties.

FAILURE AND SUCCESS

By any military measure, the Tet Offensive was a staggering defeat for the communist side. Critically, the Tet Offensive did not incite widespread popular uprising anywhere. The South Vietnamese government did not collapse.

Yet the Tet Offensive was pivotal in the trajectory of the war. The reason is tied to a factor critically important to understanding the Vietnam War as a whole: Victories on the battlefield do not necessarily lead to strategic success.

Wars are usually decided by human will, not material power or even military proficiency, though these assets are obviously helpful. In 1968, in the wake of the Tet Offensive, the American will was wavering.

On February 28, 1968, as the Tet Offensive still raged throughout South Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson met in the Oval Office with General Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Wheeler briefed the president on the latest fighting and asserted that the "major, powerful, nationwide assault has by no means run its course." As Wheeler saw it, the situation might still deteriorate, and South Vietnam could collapse if the president did not send further reinforcements. He and Westmoreland advocated sending 200,000 more troops and calling up the marine corps and army reserves to fill the vacuum left in the continental US, Europe, and elsewhere by this redoubled commitment of manpower to Vietnam.

Wheeler and the other members of the Joint Chiefs had recommended this course of action for nearly a year. Tet provided them with a new urgency for their recommendations.

In retrospect, the meeting represented something of a seminal moment in Johnson's presidency and the war itself. The generals and admirals wanted something akin to total war—unlimited bombing of North Vietnam, invasions of Cambodia and Laos, and a massive American troop

presence. Johnson's vision for the war was much more limited; he wished only to secure the sovereignty of South Vietnam without losing too many American lives and with an absolute minimum of dissent and turmoil at home. But the limited war had basically blown up in his face, and Tet was its most devastating repudiation yet.

Yet it was hardly a glowing endorsement of the military establishment either. Throughout 1967 and early 1968, senior generals had peddled the idea that the communists in Vietnam were in bad shape. The mere fact that the communists proved capable of launching such an elaborate, well-planned, and violent offensive cast great doubt on this narrative.

The Tet Offensive was covered extensively by the media. Jaw-dropping casualty lists and gruesome photos filled the front pages. Television footage of the carnage and brutality of the war was broadcast into American homes like never before. At the height of the Tet Offensive, CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, perhaps the most famous journalist in America, concluded a special series of reports from Vietnam that questioned the optimistic spin on the war being offered by the political and military leadership. The American public simply did not believe that what they were reading and seeing equated with imminent victory, or any kind of victory, in Vietnam.

Tet also discredited Johnson's personal leadership in the eyes of most Americans. Polls revealed that only 26% of voters supported his handling of the war. To make matters worse, *The New York Times* on March 10 leaked news of Westmoreland's escalation plan, generating even more public outrage and debate.

All of this meant that even if Johnson had agreed with the Joint Chiefs on the wisdom of further buildup in Vietnam, any troop increase was rapidly becoming a political impossibility. Additionally, more than 100 members of the House of Representatives were now calling for hearings to examine the administration's Vietnam policies.

LEGACIES OF THE TET OFFENSIVE

The Tet Offensive left three main legacies. First, the Viet Cong was never quite the same again. During Tet, many dedicated operatives who were skilled at hit-and-run guerrilla warfare came out to fight in conventional battles and did not survive. Though the Viet Cong remained a powerful presence in South Vietnam for the rest of the war, it was never quite as potent after Tet.

Second, the Saigon government and its military forces emerged somewhat stronger from the offensive. Third, and possibly most important, Tet altered the political landscape in the United States. The American people did not necessarily want to abandon South Vietnam. But, increasingly, they favored de-escalating American involvement and turning the war over to the South Vietnamese.

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AMERICA IN TURMOIL, 1968

The Tet Offensive would prove just the beginning of one of the most traumatic and turbulent years in modern American history: 1968. Racial tension and hatred boiled relentlessly. Antiwar sentiment skyrocketed, and a nation that had been near-united behind Vietnamese intervention in 1965 was now bitterly divided, with tens of thousands going as far as to leave the United States to avoid the deeply unpopular draft. In May and then August, North Vietnam launched new waves of offensives that would keep South Vietnam convulsing in war and American body bags mounting. It was amidst all this that Americans would also head to the polls to determine the future of the nation.

PUBLIC OPINION SHIFTS

One out of every five Americans had turned against the Vietnam War in the wake of the Tet Offensive. Antiwar protesters were demonstrating from coast to coast, and members of Congress were calling for a complete

review of the administration's war policies. Influential figures such as Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman J. William Fulbright, Massachusetts representative Thomas "Tip" O'Neill, and columnist Walter Lippman had turned against the war. "Something is wrong over there," Senator Robert Byrd of Virginia commented publicly.

The troubled state of the war and the country itself was basically destroying President Lyndon Johnson, both politically and personally. Polls showed that his approval rating had cratered to 36%.

On March 12, in the New Hampshire Democratic primary, he nearly lost to Senator Eugene McCarthy, an upstart peace candidate. Johnson subsequently met with an all-star blend of former military, diplomatic, cabinet, and political leaders in hopes of crafting some sort of plan that might yet salvage a favorable result in Vietnam. The group included such luminaries as Dean Acheson, George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, Omar Bradley, Matthew Ridgway, Maxwell Taylor, and Abe Fortas.

This group urged the president to negotiate some sort of compromise peace with the north and leave South Vietnam to its fate. The advisors had merely confirmed what Johnson already knew: There were no realistic options left to turn the situation in Vietnam around. After three years, half a million soldiers, and millions of tons of bombs dropped, Tet proved that the American strategy wasn't working. Only a dramatic, high-stakes escalation of America's commitment or a negotiated settlement could change the trajectory in Vietnam. Either spelled political doom for Johnson.

Bowing to these realities, on March 31, he gave a nationally televised address. He announced a significant reduction in the bombing of North Vietnam and called for immediate peace talks. He concluded the speech with a shocking declaration: "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president." The Tet Offensive had effectively ended the presidency of Lyndon Johnson.

THE SITUATION IN HANOI

In Hanoi, Lê Duẩn and the other architects of the Tet Offensive had no concerns about public opinion or reelection, but they too were growing more desperate. The unspoken truth was that the offensive had failed. In fact, the offensive had only strengthened the Saigon government, and its army had fought well.

Prior to this point, Lê Duẩn had viewed peace talks as a hindrance to fulfilling the objective of uniting Vietnam under communist rule. After Tet, Lê Duẩn saw things in a different light. He would employ violence when he thought it suited his aims. At the same time, he would engage his adversaries in negotiations.

Other factors influenced Lê Duẩn's thinking, though. Relations between the USSR and China, North Vietnam's two major sponsors, had been deteriorating since the 1950s, owing to traditional border disputes, differing interpretations of Marxism, and pure rivalry over influence in Asia.

NEGOTIATING IN VAIN

The North Vietnamese government announced on April 2 that it was willing to meet with the Americans. This was the first time during the war that they had even acknowledged US peace entreaties in any meaningful way, much less agreed to actual talks. In America and throughout much of the rest of the world, the prospect of these negotiations greatly raised hopes for an imminent end to the war. Unfortunately, these hopes were in vain, and in 1968 they went almost nowhere.

Diplomats from the two sides met in Paris at the Hotel Majestic on May 13. Relatively little agreement was achieved over the ensuing five months.

MILITARY PRESSURE

While the diplomats talked ineffectually in Paris, Lê Duẩn tried to ratchet up the pressure militarily. He masterminded a new offensive that began on May 4. The communists mobilized 60,000 troops for this effort, about two-thirds of the force that had executed the Tet Offensive.

The order of battle this time included 30 North Vietnamese Army regiments, plus 4 artillery regiments and 3 main force Viet Cong regiments. These NVA and VC soldiers struck 119 targets throughout the country, including Saigon.

VC main force units attacked key bridges in the area, plus the Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut air bases. Just as they had in February, they swept through Cholon and other districts in the western and southern parts of the capital.

Though this May offensive, also known as Little Tet, was less sensational in the Western press, it was even bloodier, as fighting raged in the dense urban environment. Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldiers, South Vietnamese militiamen, and American infantrymen fought block to block to retake the affected areas.

Urban combat tends to favor defenders because buildings, sewers, and the denseness of a city landscape provide them with ideal fortifications. Civilian casualties and property destruction can cause international condemnation and a sense of moral outrage, even among those whom the attackers might purport to liberate, possibly leading, then, to strategic defeat.

On the other hand, from a military standpoint, it's unacceptable to let an enemy simply take over a city and stay there. This was the dilemma in Saigon. The fighting to oust the communists from the capital lasted into early June and required huge quantities of American firepower. During that time, 30,000 homes were destroyed or heavily damaged, 87,000 people were left homeless, and several hundred were killed.

To deal with this issue, General William Westmoreland convened a joint American–South Vietnamese commission to study how to minimize collateral destruction during urban combat. He also sent US Army and Navy engineers to Saigon to rebuild the wrecked districts. The sad reality was that all the studies in the world could not change the fact that retaking a major city from such large and well-armed Viet Cong units meant destruction on a large scale. The communists had actually selected this battlefield to bring hardship to South Vietnamese civilians.

Equally violent fighting also boiled in I Corps at Dong Ha, where the NVA attempted to seize control of a corridor of lowland from the DMZ to the coast. From April 29 to May 30, a quartet of marine battalions fought a series of savage small-unit actions.

By early June, the intensity of the combat in Saigon and across I Corps and elsewhere had diminished. Once again, Lê Duẩn's gambit had failed. Some 24,000 communist troops perished, but once again, no uprising had occurred, and the South Vietnamese regime had not toppled under the pressure.

Still, Lê Duẩn remained fully committed to an aggressive course of action in the hopes of wearing down his opponent. He ruthlessly understood the grim calculus of the war—every casualty inflicted on the Americans would erode their strategic position and political will, while North Vietnamese and Viet Cong casualties had relatively little impact on his own.

FIGHTING INTO SEPTEMBER

In August, Lê Duẩn stepped up the pressure again, albeit on a significantly smaller scale than the two previous attacks. This time, the fighting centered on Tay Ninh, near the Cambodian border, and Da Nang in I Corps. The communists did not have the strength to send ground troops into Saigon, so they contented themselves with hurling 122-millimeter rockets at the capital.

Once again, the fighting was heavy, but this time it was confined mainly to remote areas where many fewer South Vietnamese civilians were affected. By the end of September, some 29,000 more VC and NVA soldiers had lost their lives, with little achieved beyond wearing down the will of the United States. Indeed, that was precisely Lê Duẩn's aim.

A TROUBLED AMERICA

All three phases of the Tet Offensive were costly military failures, but the troubled state of the American domestic scene hinted at a potentially fatal vulnerability. In particular, the April 4 assassination of the remarkable, transcendent civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. exploded simmering racial tensions. King had been an eloquent advocate of nonviolent activism against segregation and inequality for African Americans, and yet this man of peace had now been felled by a terrible act of violence. This was too much to tolerate, even for many who shared his vision.

More than 100 cities experienced some form of violent unrest, including shootings, fires, looting, and riots. The worst of it took place in Washington DC. The violence eventually subsided, but the attendant tension did not.

Not surprisingly, the presidential election in 1968 was marked by serious societal divisions and more civil unrest. With Johnson out of the way, two prominent Democrats entered the race: Bobby Kennedy, now a US senator from New York, and Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's vice president.

On the evening of June 4, Kennedy scored a big victory in the California primary. Just after midnight, he gave a thank-you speech to supporters in the ballroom of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Afterward, as he

was making his way through the hotel's kitchen, he was shot and mortally wounded by Sirhan Sirhan. Bobby Kennedy's assassination did not prompt violence so much as a national mood of disillusioned sadness.

THE ELECTION

Kennedy's death meant the Democratic nomination essentially belonged to Humphrey. In 1968, an independent candidate also played a meaningful role in the election. George Wallace, the former governor of Alabama, was an ardent segregationist and a racist who appealed to the far right, the Ku Klux Klan, and whites who were unreconciled to the end of Jim Crow customs. And his greatest constituency was northern, blue-collar whites who were discomfited by integration in their neighborhoods, the antiwar movement, and counterculture radicals. September polls showed him with a disturbing 20% of the vote.

The real pace-setter in the race was Richard Nixon, who outlasted the more conservative Ronald Reagan and the more liberal Nelson Rockefeller to win the Republican nomination. As a former congressman, senator, and vice president, Nixon had a tremendous amount of experience in public service. He favored so-called peace with honor in Vietnam but deliberately presented no real specifics as to how he might accomplish this.

Nixon's supporters were seriously dismayed at the direction the country was taking. They had no wish to abandon South Vietnam, but they were coming around to the idea that the United States should begin to de-escalate and withdraw, provided this did not mean an immediate communist victory.

Eventually, Nixon pulled out a victory on election day with a comfortable 301 electoral votes, though the popular vote was far closer: Nixon won 43.4%, Humphrey 42.7%, and Wallace 13.5%. Now Richard Nixon inherited the task of steering the bitterly divided nation through its seemingly endless war in Southeast Asia.

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RACE, CULTURE, AND WOMEN IN THE VIETNAM WAR

The Vietnam War coincided with civil rights and women's liberation movements that challenged centuries of white male dominance. In America, the civil rights movement had been bubbling for decades, but now nonviolent activists were finally demolishing legal implements of Jim Crow racism. At the same time, sexual mores and norms began to change. Quiet revolutions took place in Vietnam as well, as its cultural and social traditions were upended by the exigencies of war, exposure to Western culture, and communist social engineering—to say nothing of the fact that for millions of ordinary Vietnamese, their war for independence was viewed as a war against white imperialism.

CIVIL RIGHTS IN AMERICA

By the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. and other like-minded civil rights activists, such as the Congress of Racial Equality, or CORE, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, were pursuing a full-blown nonviolent campaign to dismantle segregation in the American south. These powerful civil rights organizations secured major successes in advancing legal rights and protections for African Americans, most notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. They also raised the political and social consciousness of an entire generation and mobilized millions of whites and Blacks alike to deeply question the cultural status quo in America and fight for social justice.

It was into this milieu that the Vietnam War came. And almost immediately, the conflict there invited troubling parallels with racial inequality in America. The segregated armed forces of World War II were still recent history, and now again America was asking and soon drafting her African American sons to fight for a country they did not feel like equal citizens of.

As a pacifist, Martin Luther King was deeply opposed to war. However, he initially resisted public comment on the war, fearing in part that it would jeopardize the progress of the civil rights movement. But by 1967, he had become convinced the two causes were inseparable. One statement he made on the subject was:

> I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube.

King's comments sparked some of the greatest backlash of his career, with many fearing that conflating Vietnam with civil rights would set the movement back. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, one of the oldest civil rights organizations in the country, criticized King's speech and explicitly disavowed a connection between the two movements.

In the first two years of the American intervention, African Americans were disproportionately represented in the draft and in combat deaths in Vietnam, intensifying the racial debate over the war. The assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, just months apart in 1968, only added to the conflagration and deepened for many the perceived connection between civil rights and Vietnam.

But the growing antiwar movement took on a complex segregated character in its own right. Despite their common cause and affinity on most issues, white and Black antiwar activists often formed their own groups and organized separate events. And even among Black activists, the Vietnam issue helped drive a deepening rift between nonviolent and militant activism.

Malcolm X, the most notable early leader of a more confrontational approach to civil rights, had also been one of the first to criticize the war and draw its connection to civil rights. Malcolm X envisioned a future in which African Americans would live separately and independently within the United States and advocated violence as a means of change.

The Black Panther Party, founded in 1966, was inspired by Malcolm X's doctrine and sought to fight for Black freedoms more aggressively. Within a few years, Black Panther ideology had also adopted significant tenets of Marxism-Leninism and Maoism.

No less significantly, Mexican Americans were concurrently organizing for rights and social justice in this period. For instance, Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers labor union drew much-needed attention to the injustices faced by Mexican Americans. Other ethnic civil rights groups, such as those representing Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Puerto Ricans, were active as well, including in antiwar opposition.

BONDS IN COMBAT ★ FOR AMERICANS SERVING IN VIETNAM, DIFFERENCES OF RACE AND CLASS GENERALLY WENT OUT THE WINDOW IN A COMBAT ENVIRONMENT. MANY SOLDIERS DEVELOPED A DEEP EMOTIONAL BOND WITH EACH OTHER, AN ALMOST MYSTICAL CONNECTION FORGED THROUGH SHARED DANGER THAT THEY COULD NEVER QUITE REPLICATE AGAIN IN CIVILIAN LIFE.

DIVISIONS IN VIETNAM

The Vietnam War took on racial dimensions among the Vietnamese as well. Although the ethnic Vietnamese, or Kinh, people represent about 80% of Vietnam's ethnic makeup, there are 54 minorities officially recognized by the modern Vietnamese government and many more that remain unrecognized.

Historically, Vietnamese language and culture had its origins in the north, and from the 11th to the 19th centuries, it progressively spread down the coast southward at the expense of the historical Cham and Khmer empires, the latter of which formed the foundation of Cambodian culture. Unassimilated Chams and Khmers, though, continued to sustain communities within the newly expanded Vietnam and became significant minority groups.

Another significant minority group in Vietnam was known by the French term *Montagnard*, an umbrella term describing the various peoples who live in the central highlands of Vietnam. During the colonial period, they were given a measure of independence by the French, and missionaries converted most of the nearly 1 million Montagnards to Christianity, contrasting them with the majority Buddhist Vietnamese.

When the French withdrew, Ngô Đình Diệm's regime sought tight control over unintegrated areas and began colonizing their traditional lands with the goal of assimilating these cultures. By the end of the 1950s, they had begun armed resistance to these efforts, which morphed into a political movement known as the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races, or FULRO.

During the Vietnam War and beyond, FULRO would wage its own insurgency against both the South Vietnamese and the Viet Cong in an attempt to preserve their culture, language, lands, and autonomy. Seeing FULRO, and particularly the Montagnards, as important potential allies, the United States set up the Civilian Irregular Defense Group, or CIDG, which trained the Montagnards and other minorities to fight the Viet Cong in the highly contested central highlands, where they served with particular distinction and bravery in ranger and reconnaissance formations. Some 40,000 Montagnards served with US forces throughout the war, and in turn, the United States pressured the South Vietnamese to extend some forms of political recognition and independence to them.

But communist reprisals for this cooperation were severe. The Viet Cong deliberately targeted the Montagnards during their campaigns, assassinating their leadership and massacring villages.

WESTERN INFLUENCE IN VIETNAM

To some, the division between North and South Vietnam effectively created not just two countries artificially separated by ideology but almost two different Vietnamese identities. And the war profoundly deepened regional

differences in culture and lifestyle, particularly in South Vietnam. As the most developed area of French Indochina, it already had a somewhat more urbanized, Catholic, and Westernized character than the rest of the country.

The coming of American advisors and troops accelerated the spread of Western culture across the region. By the 1960s, American culture was everywhere in South Vietnam. American products overwhelmed South Vietnamese native industries, and millions of Vietnamese found service-oriented jobs working for the Americans.

The massive influx of American troops during the 1960s and 1970s also destabilized the South Vietnamese piaster, the country's main unit of currency, prompting chronic inflation and also a rise in the use of the US dollar for transactions in the cities.

BAD INTERACTIONS ★ MANY AMERICANS IN VIETNAM KNEW AND UNDERSTOOD NEXT TO NOTHING ABOUT THE COUNTRY, THE PEOPLE, AND THE CULTURE THEY WERE INTERACTING WITH—AND VICE VERSA. TO THE VIETNAMESE, THE AMERICANS OFTEN APPEARED MENACING AND THREATENING. FAR TOO OFTEN, THE AMERICANS BEHAVED RUDELY OR INTERACTED WITH CALLOUS CONDESCENSION. EVEN WHEN THE AMERICANS TRIED TO BE NICE AND CONSIDERATE—WHICH WAS OFTEN—THEY SOMETIMES INADVERTENTLY BLUNDERED INTO CULTURAL FAUX PAS. FOR INSTANCE, SOLDIERS WHO GENEROUSLY GAVE AWAY FOOD, CANDY, GUM, CIGARETTES, AND OTHER ITEMS COULD PROVOKE RESENTMENT FROM LOCALS WHO WERE PUT OFF BY WHAT THEY PERCEIVED AS OSTENTATIOUS SHOWS OF WEALTH.

NORTH VIETNAM'S RESTRICTIONS

In contrast to South Vietnam, North Vietnam heavily restricted Western media, products, and influences from entering the country. A state-owned press and extensive artistic and cultural censorship, as well as intensive indoctrination through the education system and institutional drilling, strictly enforced a socialist-style culture.

After the fall of Saigon, the communists' head of propaganda decried American influence on the south. This paved the way for the forcible reeducation of nearly 1 million Vietnamese as well as extensive censorship, book burning, and cultural vandalism, all of which was designed to suppress and reverse the cultural shift that had indeed occurred in South Vietnam.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN AMERICA

The Vietnam War also coincided with significant transformations in the practice and perception of gender roles in both America and Vietnam. In America, the climate of reform and protest that was awakened helped fuel a newly invigorated feminism.

Led by such influential activists as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s pursued the objectives of creating opportunity for women in every walk of life, outside the traditional role of mothers and homemakers.

Feminists formed the National Organization for Women in 1966 and later lobbied for the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing equal employment and an end to all legal distinctions between men and women. They were also a large part of the Vietnam War protest movement and the civil rights movement.

Disappointingly, they were not always treated as equals by their more powerful male colleagues. Roy Wilkins, the head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, told women in the

organization that they were ignorant of how politics worked and that they should "listen to their leaders and just return home." Vietnam protest groups were often similarly dismissive.

Many women formed their own protest groups against the war, such as the Women Strike for Peace. Some women viewed the war as so immoral that they urged young men to evade or resist the draft or perhaps become conscientious objectors.

The gender gap in public polling routinely revealed the strength of women's opposition to the war, which was nearly always stronger than men's opposition. Older women in particular were much more likely to oppose the war than older men.

The women's liberation movement saw a relatively high amount of success. For instance, by the 1970s, more than 40% of American women held full-time jobs, and by the end of the century, female education levels and representation in many professions had grown markedly.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN VIETNAM

In a much more direct way, the Vietnam War spurred significant change in the role and rights of women in Vietnam. After taking power in North Vietnam, the communists introduced radical and far-reaching social reforms in the north, including bans of forced and child marriages as well as laws against domestic violence.

In a deeply traditional and Confucian society, gender roles were upended rapidly as the Communist Party sought to place women outside of the home to foster industrial growth and development. Hồ Chí Minh drew parallels between women's rights and Vietnamese freedom more generally: "Women make up half of the population. If women are not liberated, then society is not free."

With the start of war, millions of women were mobilized by the north in military roles as well. In the North Vietnamese Army, they were largely confined to support roles, and they were almost entirely under male leadership. Nevertheless, even these supporting roles represented a radical departure from the traditional role of Vietnamese women in society.

In the Viet Cong, female recruitment was far more expansive, and there were all-female VC combat units that served during the war. Some took on legendary status, like the Long-Haired Army, which operated in the Mekong delta. Part of the VC's appeal, particularly in rural areas, was its more progressive views on female participation in society.

By comparison, South Vietnamese women were usually confined to more traditional roles, largely serving as nurses and in secretarial roles in the early years of the war. However, as manpower grew tighter and the war dragged on, women were progressively allowed to serve in some combat roles.

In the realm of espionage, women played prominent roles as communist operatives gathering intelligence across South Vietnam, often completely unsuspected by the authorities, who scrutinized men far more closely. By 1970, the CIA believed the VC had some 30,000 agents operating across the South Vietnamese government.

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THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

This lecture focuses on a particularly influential, prominent reform movement from the 1960s and 1970s: the antiwar movement. Antiwar opinion was all over the political spectrum, and antiwar advocates greatly differed in outlook, tactics, and objectives.

THE DOVES

Broadly speaking, most activists fell into one of three categories of antiwar opinion. The most prominent group, in terms of media coverage and intellectual influence, consisted of those who opposed the war on a moral basis, generally known as doves. They wanted peace immediately and a complete American withdrawal from Vietnam, regardless of what that meant for the Saigon government.

For them, America had become an imperialist bully, propping up a corrupt, repressive Saigon regime against the wishes of the Vietnamese people. Culturally, the core of the doves consisted of hippies: cultural rebels who felt alienated from mainstream American life.

The most extreme of the hippies maintained that American soldiers were routinely perpetrating atrocities in Vietnam. This segment was a vocal minority of doves overall, though. Most doves still respected servicemen and servicewomen, especially those forcibly drafted, and genuinely felt that their antiwar demonstrations were the best way to save their lives and bring them home.

Some radical doves also argued that the war was a symptom of what was wrong with American society—poverty, racism, sexism, imperialism, and an avaricious, patriarchal capitalist economic structure. They were determined not just to end the war but to use it to bring about a social revolution in America.

THE PRAGMATIC OPPONENTS

Today, America's cultural memory of the 1960s and 1970s is dominated by images of the hippies, and the doves were by far the most vocal and visible section of antiwar opinion. But culturally and politically, they were a minority. There were vastly more so-called squares than hippies during the Vietnam War. A square was someone who was conventional. These were patriots who generally supported the military and believed in anti-communism, and they had no real moral qualms with the war. But as a group, they were diverse in their political opinions.

A growing number of squares increasingly questioned how the United States could possibly win the conflict, and how the country could afford to pour endless resources and manpower into Vietnam when there were so many other issues at home and abroad. Their opposition, thus, was pragmatic rather than doctrinaire.

Many of the war's most influential political opponents were pragmatic, rather than moral, opponents. A good example is Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, chair of the powerful Foreign Relations Committee, who, despite playing a significant role as Johnson's ally early in the war, soon turned against it and become one of its more persuasive opponents.

A square through and through, Fulbright felt that the United States could never win in Vietnam. He used his committee as a forum to grill administration figures on the war and mobilize public opinion against it. To demonstrate his own feelings during committee proceedings, he once wore a tie adorned with doves and olive branches.

THE HAWKISHLY OPPOSED

The third component of antiwar opinion is almost entirely forgotten in popular memory: the hawkishly opposed. They fully supported the mission of fighting communism. In fact, most were virulent anti-communists. But they adamantly opposed the limited nature of the Vietnam War. They wanted the American government to win in Vietnam or leave. Anything else was, in their opinion, a waste of lives.

Many were actually serving in Vietnam and simply wanted to be allowed to fight with no restrictions. Later, as veterans, they stridently claimed that they could have won the war if only the government had allowed them.

Mississippi senator John Stennis, chair of the Armed Services Committee, was a prime example. He constantly pushed President Lyndon Johnson to escalate the war, especially in relation to the bombing of North Vietnam. How many Americans agreed with Stennis and others like him is unknown. But a 1967 Harris poll asked Americans what most troubled them about the Vietnam War, and 12% responded that they were most bothered by the lack of progress toward winning it.

DEMONSTRATIONS

Segments of antiwar sentiment developed over time. Only Quakers and other pacifist groups such as the War Resisters League actively protested the Vietnam War from the start. But widespread opposition began to emerge in 1964 and 1965.

Perhaps the best example of this is Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS. The organization was founded in 1959 by students at the University of Michigan to demonstrate support for labor unions, civil rights, and social reform. But in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, SDS stepped

up its antiwar activities. Members organized demonstrations on multiple campuses and circulated petitions among draft-age men. New chapters were founded at dozens of colleges and universities around the country.

By 1966, SDS claimed 400 chapters with more than 30,000 members nationwide, and it would continue to grow while the war escalated. An SDS protest in Washington DC on April 17, 1965, attracted about 20,000 people. That fall, some 15,000 protesters marched on the Oakland Army Terminal, where soldiers routinely departed for Vietnam.

Some campuses, like Michigan and Harvard University, became hotbeds of antiwar activity. Antiwar faculty and SDS members began to organize teach-ins, whereby they convened in a lecture hall or some other classroom to instruct participants on the wrongness of the Vietnam War.

As the war grew bloodier and as nightly television coverage brought images of the war's horror into the living rooms of average Americans, peace activism became the domain of more and more everyday Americans. And within a couple of years, mass rallies were putting constant pressure on the Johnson administration. On a single day in April 1967, 130,000 people marched in New York City, and dozens of young men burned their draft cards. Another 70,000 rallied in San Francisco.

THE PENTAGON MARCH

No demonstration was more important than the march on the Pentagon in October 1967. About 100,000 protesters converged on Washington. The diverse crowd included pacifists, SDS members, professors, Black militants, radical revolutionaries, feminists, and hippies. But a large percentage of the participants were peaceful, average Americans of all backgrounds, from all regions.

The majority intended only to demonstrate peacefully. But the most radical of the militants wanted to overrun the Pentagon, shut it down, and supposedly end the war in Vietnam. They ran into a strong cordon of federal marshals and US soldiers who were armed with rifles and tear gas.

The troops were not equipped with live ammo, but they successfully beat back the protesters who were trying to force their way into the building. The radicals had no choice but to retreat, and the rally coalesced into a peaceful, but tense, standoff.

From a modern vantage point, it is astonishing to think that the militants believed they could take over the Pentagon and somehow end the war that way, but many really did, and they were devastated by their failure. Regardless, the Pentagon march proved a harbinger in two respects.

First, it signaled that some in the movement were more than willing to use violence to further their aims. Ironically, they now endorsed brute force to bring about peace. Second, the mass participation of so many moderate, peaceful Americans from all over the country demonstrated that the war was losing support among many conventional Americans. Both trends continued in the months and years to come.

ESCALATING EVENTS

Protests were happening internationally too, among key American allies like West Germany, Australia, Canada, and France. In Sweden, even Prime Minister Olof Palme joined protestors in the streets.

USE OF FORCE ★ A FEW ANTIWAR MILITANTS DEDICATED THEMSELVES TO REVOLUTIONARY FORCE. THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND, A VIOLENT CELL OF FORMER SDS MEMBERS, UTILIZED ARSON, BANK ROBBERIES, VANDALISM, AND ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATIONS, APPARENTLY IN AN EFFORT TO BRING THE DESTRUCTION OF VIETNAM TO THE STREETS OF AMERICA.

Draft resistance increased, as did antiwar movement efforts to persuade young men to refuse military service, either by direct defiance, leaving the country, or, far more commonly, by simple evasion. Among those who did not serve, 60% actively avoided the draft, usually by arranging for some kind of deferment.

Notably, when mass protests engulfed many universities during the spring of 1970 in response to President Richard Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, deadly violence marred two of them. At Kent State University, National Guardsmen opened fire on demonstrators and killed four people, two of whom were bystanders. At Jackson State College, demonstrators threw rocks at cars and set fires. Police arrived on the scene, dispersed the protesters, and then opened fire on a dorm window, killing two students.

Though protests generally took place unhindered by the authorities, the behavior of the federal government toward antiwar activists was hardly above reproach. Both the Johnson and Nixon administrations used the FBI and the CIA to spy on peace organizations, ostensibly to check for ties to foreign governments or communists, but more commonly to sabotage them.

LATE IN 1969

As the war climaxed from 1968 to 1970, so too did mass demonstrations against it. Probably the best example was Moratorium Day on October 15, 1969. Planned by the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, the day saw mass gatherings in more than 500 towns and cities nationwide.

In November of 1969, one of the worst American atrocities of the war came to light: the My Lai Massacre. As part of operations attempting to clear the Viet Cong from the Quang Ngai province in March of 1968, two US Army companies had been ordered to secure the village of Son My, where resistance from a VC battalion had been significant. Though accounts differ, the US companies were given aggressive orders to enter the village and wipe out the enemy battalion for good.

Yet in the village, the VC were nowhere to be found. Only women, old men, and children were present. As the soldiers rounded up the villagers in a vain attempt to find insurgents, confusion, exasperation, and the extreme pressures of war unleashed the very worst. The soldiers simply began executing the villagers en masse. At least 347 were killed.

Commanding officers covered up the incident, reporting it as a victory, and the truth remained hidden for some time. Eventually, several ordinary soldiers themselves began writing letters to their senior officers, generals, and eventually congressmen, asking that the massacre be investigated.

When the story finally broke in November 1969, it was met with near-universal outrage at home and abroad. Days later, more than half a million protestors converged on Washington, near the White House. Pete Seeger; Peter, Paul and Mary; John Denver; Arlo Guthrie; and other artists performed. Their presence symbolized the almost-universal opposition to the war among countercultural pop music artists.

THE IMPACT OF ATROCITIES

To some extent, claims of atrocities and proven war crimes like My Lai helped stigmatize Vietnam veterans in popular esteem. By 1970, soldiers in uniform on American streets risked being on the receiving end of hostile treatment. The trauma of these experiences has remained with many veterans for decades.

Atrocities absolutely did happen, and far too often, predominantly when American firepower killed Vietnamese impersonally. But the vast majority of the nearly 3 million Americans who deployed to Vietnam never engaged in nor saw an atrocity, especially person-to-person felonies.

Between 1965 and 1971, 201 army soldiers and 77 marines were court-martialed and convicted of murder, rape, or assault. Since the war, military records have documented another 320 crimes, with between 200 and 300 deaths. Undoubtedly, too, some soldiers committed and got away with crimes that never came to light.

No number of war crimes could ever be acceptable, but those figures represent a tiny fraction of Americans who served in Vietnam. By any fair measure, it strains credulity to assert that atrocities were routine or accepted as normal. Scholars have examined the war in great depth for several decades and found nothing to indicate crimes on a systemic scale. The average American soldier served honorably and served well.

THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT'S IMPACT

By 1969, it was ordinary, patriotic squares who were at the core of the war's opposition. It was easy for presidents and their allies to caricature incendiary activists, but it was not easy to do the same to law-abiding voters and concerned citizens who had come to believe that the war must end, sooner rather than later.

Historians still debate how much impact the antiwar movement had on ending the conflict. Some argue that the morally opposed, often radical, activists drove events and made it impossible for the United States to remain involved in Vietnam. Others argue that they actually prolonged the war by motivating Hanoi to keep fighting in hopes of collapsing popular support for the war in America.

But a strong argument can be made that the pragmatically opposed moderates, with an assist from the frustrated hawks, had the greatest effect on ending the war. That's because they already had political and economic influence. The prolonged nature of the war and its human and financial cost only served to lend credence to their argument that the war was either unwinnable or not worth fighting.

An anecdotal example comes from August of 1971, when a group of 28 activists broke into the draft board office in Camden, New Jersey, and started stealing and destroying thousands of documents. The perpetrators were not radical activists but mainstream Americans, including several teachers, blue-collar workers, middle-aged parents, and four priests. They were immediately arrested by the FBI, who had planted an informant in the group.

The so-called Camden 28 refused a plea bargain and chose to stand trial, facing 40 years in prison. But proceedings quickly turned into a trial on the war itself, with even the FBI informant turning hostile against the prosecution on the stand.

There was no question that the defendants had committed the felonies with which they were charged; indeed, they admitted to them. But the jury acquitted them regardless, in a now-famous case of nullification, effectively refusing to enforce the law.

These were not radicals but squares. They were Nixon's silent majority. And in a somber courtroom of working-class America, they were calmly, legally, and powerfully protesting too.

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NIXON AND VIETNAMIZATION, 1969

The health and legitimacy of the government in Saigon was of critical importance to Richard Nixon when he entered the White House in 1969. President Nixon's goal was Vietnamization, which meant bringing US forces home and turning the war over to the South Vietnamese.

ELECTIONS

In September 1967, after years of pressure from the Americans to bolster the democratic credentials of their flagging ally, South Vietnam held comprehensive elections for the presidency and the National Assembly. It also adopted a bona fide constitution similar to the United States.

Since 1965, General Nguyễn Cao Kỳ had run an iron-fisted yet relatively stable military regime in Saigon, while the more measured General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu had served as head of state in a largely figurehead role. Both Thiệu and Kỳ had been far more focused on defeating the communists than their predecessors had been, and with American backing, they were

LYNDON JOHNSON, WILLIAM WESTMORELAND, NGUYỄN VĂN THIỆU, NGUYỄN CAO KỲ

the front-runners in a field of 11 candidates who ran for president and vice president in 1967. They won with a plurality of just under 35% of the vote, with an 83% turnout.

Though Thiệu and Kỳ ran on a joint ticket in 1967, they were rivals for power, and their alliance was largely pragmatic. In the months that followed the election, Thiệu used the presidency to amass most of the power and marginalize Kỳ and his faction. Soon, Thiệu became the undisputed political power in Saigon, and he would remain so for most of the rest of South Vietnam's existence.

The 1967 elections also sent hundreds of representatives and senators to the National Assembly and established a constitution that made South Vietnam a republic in reality, not just in name. It was neither completely corrupt nor completely pure.

Considering the serious pressures wrought by an existential war, the successful holding of elections was fairly impressive. Nothing of the sort ever took place in North Vietnam during the war, nor has it happened since the communists unified the country under their control.

A NEW APPROACH

Nixon's goal of Vietnamization was anything but new. During their respective times as president, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson had also hoped that the South Vietnamese might be able to defeat communism without substantial American help. But there were some differences now.

For instance, one factor was the continued stability of Thiệu's government, and another was the fact that the South Vietnamese armed forces had acquitted themselves well during the costly, violent battles of 1968. By any measure, Saigon's military was stronger now.

Nixon also understood that the American electorate was seriously weary of American involvement in the war. As a presidential candidate, Nixon intentionally kept his intentions for Vietnam opaque.

Once he became president, he found that his options were limited. After shocking losses on the battlefield in 1968, the North Vietnamese were just as committed to the war as ever. South Vietnam may have been stronger than ever before, but this did not necessarily mean that it was strong enough to survive without massive American support.

Nixon faced the difficult task of extricating US forces in a timely enough manner to satisfy the American public while also keeping the communists at bay. The goal was to achieve what he dubbed "peace with honor."

In addition to Vietnamization, Nixon intended to pursue trilateral diplomacy with North Vietnam's two major sponsors, the Soviet Union and China. Although Nixon had a well-earned reputation as an ardent anti-communist, he felt that the time was now right to pursue a détente—a scaling back of tensions—with China and the USSR. Moreover, Nixon sensed an opening as relations between the two communist superpowers had continued to sour.

A MILITARY CHANGE

Along with new diplomatic and political initiatives, Nixon also sought to shake up the military strategy on the ground in Vietnam. Spearheading the change was General Creighton Abrams, who took over from General William Westmoreland as commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam in June of 1968. Westmoreland became the US Army's chief of staff.

Abrams was a uniquely intuitive leader with a well-deserved reputation for extraordinary courage, impeccable honesty, and an incisive intellect. Foremost, Abrams believed that the attrition strategy had clearly failed in the Vietnam War. The allies had still not forced the communists to a crossover point where they could no longer replace their losses, nor had they even come close to destroying the communists' capability to continue fighting.

Abrams felt that the search-and-destroy attrition approach had distracted US forces from the main metric necessary to win: securing the rural population from communist persuasion and domination. As the new MACV commander, he began to implement what he dubbed a one-war strategy. Instead of searching for elusive enemy formations, especially in remote areas, he focused on clearing and holding populated terrain, combining the efforts of American and South Vietnamese forces, and destroying communist influence in the villages.

He also recognized how dependent the communists were on complicated logistics. Because of the long lines of supply, and the limited capacity of the Hồ Chí Minh trail, NVA and main force VC units badly needed local guerrillas to provide them with intelligence, shelter, and sustenance from pre-positioned supplies.

Rather than trying to find a highly mobile enemy, it made more sense to find and destroy their supply caches and pacify the villages and farms on which they relied. To achieve this, combined operations between Army of the Republic of Vietnam and US Army units became more common under Abrams.

The idea of winning over the so-called hearts and minds of ordinary Vietnamese became more important than compiling body counts. Half-trained South Vietnamese militia forces were given new weapons to combat local force Viet Cong, and there were new attempts to crush the VC infrastructure, village by village, hamlet by hamlet.

The one-war strategy meshed well with Vietnamization. To Abrams, it seemed to be the best way to secure rural South Vietnam and prepare the Saigon government to take over sole responsibility for the war.

THE NORTH STRIKES

The communists were not sitting idle, though. Rather than sit and wait for Nixon's diplomatic and Abrams's military strategies to unfold, Lê Duẩn and his allies in the politburo resolved to strike first, with an offensive designed to inflict deathblows on South Vietnamese military forces and heavy casualties on the Americans, and to test the will of the new American president.

The communist offensives of 1968 had failed militarily, but they had severely tried American public opinion and political will. So, once again, Hanoi launched a Tet-style offensive, known as Tet 1969, on February 23 of that year.

This new blitz focused on military objectives rather than populated areas, especially near Saigon and Da Nang. The attacks raged for three weeks and were characterized mainly by sapper and rocket assaults on key military bases such as Long Binh Post and Bien Hoa Air Base. Other attacks hit American supply convoys. Unlike the previous year, the communists simply did not have the supplies, manpower, or local support to sustain the offensive.

Abrams had excellent intelligence information about the communist buildup before the offensive, knowing when and where they intended to attack. Allied forces inflicted thousands of casualties on the enemy and shattered the offensive. However, around 1,100 Americans and 1,500 South Vietnamese were killed in a three-week span.

POLITICAL FALLOUT

The war had reached a point where any spike in US casualties might create overwhelming political pressure on Nixon to withdraw. This became evident a couple months later during Operation Apache Snow, an attempt by the 101st Airborne Division and the ARVN's 1st Infantry Division to subdue the A Shau Valley, an NVA-dominated supply and transit point in I Corps.

Allied soldiers engaged and fought bitterly and valorously to capture a key piece of high ground, labeled Hill 937 on US maps and later nicknamed Hamburger Hill for the grisly fate many soldiers met on it. After a week of heavy bombardment, napalming, and nearly 400 US casualties, allied forces finally took the hill on May 20, only to later abandon it.

The battle sparked fresh outrage in the United States. *Life* magazine, one of the most popular periodicals in the country, published a haunting feature entitled "Vietnam: One Week's Dead" that included photographs of all 242 Americans who were killed between May 28 and June 3.

The photos personalized the human cost of the war for many average Americans. Amidst growing public pressure, Nixon ordered Abrams to do anything he could to minimize US losses, and subsequently MACV's stance began to transition from proactive to reactive.

RESPONDING TO TET 1969

Nixon also had to decide what to do in response to Tet 1969. During peace talks in Paris the previous year, the North Vietnamese had indicated that they would not send more reinforcements down the Hồ Chi Min trail, nor launch major attacks, if President Johnson agreed to end Operation Rolling Thunder. Johnson had done his part and suspended North Vietnamese bombing on October 31. But Tet 1969 clearly demonstrated that the communists had not held up their end of the bargain.

Though Nixon could show that the communists had clearly violated their agreements, he knew he could not risk resuming the high-profile bombing campaign of North Vietnam without triggering tremendous international and domestic outcry. Instead, he opted for a more deceptive course of action.

For the entire war, the communists had maintained base camps, supply lines, and staging depots in the border areas of supposedly neutral Cambodia. These sanctuaries had proven a thorn in the side of MACV.

Abrams had good information on the location and disposition of enemy bases in Cambodia, and, like Westmoreland before him, lobbied the Pentagon and White House for permission to deal with them. After Tet, Nixon finally gave him the go-ahead for a major bombing campaign, but only under the utmost secrecy.

Besides not wanting to fire up antiwar sentiment, he had two other reasons to keep the bombing quiet. First, he hoped to inflict a major tactical and strategic defeat on the communists in a low-profile setting. Second, he wanted to keep the public glare off Cambodian authorities so that they would not be forced to do something about the bombing.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Cambodian head of state, had severed relations with the US four years earlier and seemingly cast his lot with China and North Vietnam. But his relationship with both countries had since declined as the war in Southeast Asia had escalated. He was actually willing to secretly tolerate or feign ignorance about the heavy American bombing of his own country. Bizarrely, this led to the reestablishment of relations between the US and Cambodia.

The clandestine bombing, dubbed Operation Menu, began on March 18 and continued on and off for the next 14 months. However, the secrecy did not last forever. In May, an unknown administration official, perhaps with antiwar motives, leaked the story to *The New York Times*.

An enraged Nixon enlisted the FBI to track down the leaker, prompting illegal wiretapping of the phones of government officials and journalists. This reckless search for the Menu leaker began a pattern of unlawful surveillance

that may have laid foundations for the later Watergate scandal. But in 1969, Nixon was fortunate in that the *Times* story did not lead to further media coverage or widespread outcry, so the air strikes continued unabated.

THE PHOENIX PROGRAM

In addition to Menu, Abrams was employing another clandestine weapon, this one aimed at pacification. The Phoenix Program was a joint South Vietnamese–US effort to root out and destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure, or VCI, which generally referred to the political and administrative side of the insurgency, not the average guerrilla fighter.

Phoenix had been organized in late 1967 under the umbrella of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, the component of MACV that focused on pacification. In practice, Phoenix was run by the CIA in conjunction with American and South Vietnamese special operations forces.

Their main targets were the tax collectors, propagandists, political organizers, and leaders who comprised the Viet Cong's shadow government, which dominated villages across South Vietnam. It was clear to Abrams that an operative who could collect taxes and establish political control over an area represented far more of a threat than did a regular guerrilla with a rifle.

The purpose of Phoenix was to identify VCI members, capture and interrogate them, and perhaps turn them to Saigon's side. In general, South Vietnamese provincial reconnaissance units took the lead in attempting to identify and hunt down VCI members. Often working alongside American or Australian personnel, they raided villages or ambushed the guerrillas.

The primary mission was almost always to capture Viet Cong personnel and send them to a provincial interrogation center in hopes of gathering as much information as possible about the local VC organization. Some captives were tortured.

According to the North Vietnamese and the VC themselves, the program struck a heavy blow against the communist insurgency. From 1968 to 1972, Phoenix put more than 80,000 VC out of action, about 29% of whom were

killed. These deaths were almost always in conventional firefights rather than deliberate assassinations. The rest were captured. A few, perhaps between 10% and 15%, changed sides.

Phoenix was not, as some opponents of the program later claimed, an assassination operation. But amidst decades of bitter struggle, abuses did occur, with some Vietnamese using Phoenix as an excuse to settle vendettas.

CONCLUSION

In late 1969, Operation Keystone Eagle began, withdrawing elements of the 3rd Marine Division. This was the start of Nixon's promised withdrawal. Vietnamization had begun. Yet for most of the half million Americans in Vietnam, the war simply ground on, day by frightening day, especially for American infantry personnel who did the dangerous job of carrying out the new strategic vision of their leaders.

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THE RACE AGAINST TIME, 1970

As of 1970, America was confronting the limitations of its power. The country was exhausted with the war in Vietnam, vexed over what to do next, and running out of time. President Richard Nixon was in a similar state of fatigue and stress.

THE SITUATION

By the beginning of 1970, the US and its president were in a delicate position in Vietnam. On the plus side, the allies had arguably made inroads since the dark days of 1968. The Viet Cong was reeling from the terrible losses suffered during the offensives of 1968 and 1969. They had also been harmed by the measured success of Creighton Abrams's one-war pacification strategy and the Phoenix Program.

The growing stability of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's regime and the rising performance of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam were also helping the allies gain ground against the insurgency. And there were still more than 300,000 US troops in Vietnam, plus air and sea forces. In late 1969, Hồ

Chí Minh had died, depriving the North Vietnamese of the one communist nationalist figure who was admired throughout all of Vietnam and even internationally.

But despite these improvements, Nixon was short on time. Day by day, troop withdrawals were weakening the American presence in Vietnam. Reversing that course or resuming northern bombing were the main weapons Nixon had against the communists, but to use them would provoke serious uproar and antiwar unrest in the streets of America.

Meanwhile, peace negotiations had, to this point, proven to be totally unproductive. The communists might have been just as weary of the war, but without domestic opposition to worry about, they had time on their side, and they knew it.

Yet Nixon also knew that if he immediately withdrew the US from the war, as most peace activists wanted, the communists might well conquer South Vietnam. This would negate years of American blood and sacrifice and deal a blow to the country's international prestige. Moreover, the fear of communism spreading in Southeast Asia was as strong as ever. Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, and Thailand were facing serious communist insurgencies. Time was needed for Vietnamization and the new one-war strategy to work.

AN IMPROVED ARVN

At this juncture, the outcome of the war was still in the balance. Nixon's Vietnamization policy was starting to yield results. By 1970, there were more than 700,000 South Vietnamese men under arms. The ARVN had now become one of the largest armies in the world. And for the first time, they were equipped with the same kind of modern infantry weapons as American soldiers, including M16 rifles, M60 machine guns, M72 light antitank weapons, and M79 grenade launchers.

All of this meshed well with Abrams's strategy to emphasize pacification of the countryside rather than conventional big-unit operations. And better weapons tended to generate better combat performance. The ARVN's training standards had also improved, as had its leadership.

AN IMPROVED GOVERNMENT

Improvement had also occurred in Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's Saigon government. After the failure of the communist offensives in 1968 and 1969, the capital was more or less secure, as was Thiệu's position at the head of government.

For many years, tenancy had been a serious problem in the countryside. Relatively few landowners controlled much of the productive, arable land and rented it out to tenants, many of whom then became trapped in an endless cycle of debt.

The fundamental injustice of having a small class of well-heeled owners controlling most of the land at the expense of so many peasants was obvious to any fair-minded person. Additionally, the north had undergone significant land reforms since the 1950s that redistributed land to millions of peasants and significantly improved the quality of life and wealth of North Vietnam's very poorest. This, as much as any other factor, had contributed to the spread of Viet Cong influence at the village level earlier in the war.

The Saigon government had always been in a tight spot in relation to the tenancy issue. Landlords comprised an important constituency for the government, so South Vietnamese officials could not afford to alienate them. But ultimately, to defeat the communists at the grassroots level, the Republic of Vietnam had to win the loyalty of the tenant farmers.

On March 26, 1970, Thiệu signed the so-called Land-to-the-Tiller bill, a measure that went a long way toward solving the tenancy problem and winning over many ordinary Vietnamese. The new law redistributed 2.5 million acres of land, free of charge, to more than half a million farm families. There's little doubt that this won Thiệu the support of many rural Vietnamese.

THREATS IN CAMBODIA

Vietnamization was showing signs of success, but the change was gradual. And Nixon simply didn't have the time to wait for the long-term efforts of Vietnamization and pacification to produce these slow but steady gains.

Nixon found himself deeply frustrated with what he perceived as communist intransigence at the negotiating table. Even in the face of Nixon's secret bombing of Cambodia, the north had shown no inclination to abandon those bases. By the estimates of intelligence analysts of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, there were at least 15 major base camp complexes at or near the Cambodian border.

General Abrams knew a great deal about these bases, largely because of the incredibly courageous efforts of specially trained long-range reconnaissance patrols, or LRRPs. Their successes proved that, in war, nothing really trumps on-the-ground human intelligence.

Armed with excellent information about the threat posed by the communist base sanctuaries, General Abrams yearned to launch a ground operation to destroy them. However, it was quite politically difficult to launch a ground invasion, especially at a time when the Nixon administration was pledging to de-escalate American involvement in Vietnam.

INTERVENING IN CAMBODIA

Political events within Cambodia helped sway the president in favor of the invasion. Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the head of government, had for years effectively aligned himself with the communists, and he had severed diplomatic relations with the US.

The Cambodian port of Sihanoukville was responsible for about one-third of communist supplies that moved into South Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge, the local communist movement, had, with North Vietnamese support, begun an insurgency against the Cambodian government in 1967, though even then, Sihanouk preferred to appease rather than risk major confrontation.

In early 1970, Sihanouk traveled to France for medical treatment. In his absence, his defense minister, the pro-American and anti-communist General Lon Nol, deposed him in a coup. Nol shut down Sihanoukville to communist ships and ordered the North Vietnamese to withdraw their troops from Cambodia.

But soon, the country descended into a full-blown civil war as Nol's forces fought the Khmer Rouge, Sihanouk loyalists, and other militia groups for control. Soon the North Vietnamese were fighting Lon Nol too.

The new anti-communist Cambodian government's struggle against the Khmer Rouge and the North Vietnamese provided Nixon with political cover for a move into Cambodia. On April 25, he ordered a full-blown invasion by 50,000 ARVN and 30,000 American soldiers. Their mission was to destroy the base camp sanctuaries and capture the Central Office for South Vietnam, or COSVN, the Viet Cong's main headquarters, and generally kill Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army personnel.

On May 1, following massive B-52 bombing raids, troops from four major American units crossed the border. The units were the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, the 25th Infantry Division, the 1st Cavalry Division, and the 4th Infantry Division. For nearly two months, allied soldiers roamed through the jungles of eastern Cambodia.

The terrain consisted of thick foliage, noxious swamps, muddy tunnels or base camps, and grassy plains. At times there were significant firefights, but mostly there were just skirmishes. Many NVA and VC simply melted deeper into Cambodia.

The American and South Vietnamese soldiers spent most of their days patrolling selected sectors. Over time, too many Cambodian civilians got killed or wounded by the US bombing and shelling, or in firefights between the warring sides. At times, the Americans also found evidence of atrocities committed by retreating enemy soldiers against the locals. The NVA also suffered badly, falling victim by the thousands to American firepower.

By the time the operation finished at the end of June, more than 10,000 NVA and VC had fallen. Another 2,500 had either defected through a program called Chieu Hoi or gotten captured. And the operation inflicted a staggering blow on communist logistics.

CONSEQUENCES FOR NIXON

Nixon's decision to send ground forces into Cambodia had some serious negative consequences, too. The US had officially widened the war to all of Indochina, but it was not willing to make the kind of commitment necessary to exploit the new situation.

The limited timetable and scope of the invasion gave the communists the opportunity to simply withdraw deeper into Cambodia, expand their supply networks to compensate for the loss of Sihanoukville, make common cause with the Khmer Rouge, and begin to dominate areas where the allies were not willing to go.

Within a few months, the NVA and VC reoccupied their old base camp areas, similar to what had happened so many times in South Vietnam after the conclusion of big-unit operations. In Cambodia, Lon Nol now found himself fighting the Khmer Rouge, the NVA, and the VC—and without a major US presence, he could not hope to outlast these powerful adversaries. The bitter irony was that the 1970 invasion paved the way for the Khmer Rouge to eventually take over Cambodia, something Nixon would never have wanted.

Perhaps most significantly of all, at least from an American perspective, was the fact that the incursion sparked an explosion of antiwar protest throughout the US, especially on college campuses. To the protesters, the president seemed to be talking a good game about withdrawal while he was actually expanding the war.

Throughout May, even as the fighting raged in Cambodia, demonstrations proliferated coast to coast; 150,000 people gathered in San Francisco and another 100,000 in Washington. Protests occurred at nearly 900 colleges and universities and involved more than 1 million students. Some of the protests turned violent.

There were, however, some pro-war demonstrations too, most notably in New York City, where about 100,000 construction workers and other blue-collar demonstrators marched to voice their support for the invasion. But the reality was that opposition to the war now carried more weight in the realm of public and political opinion.

Many members of Congress in both parties had grown fed up with American involvement in Vietnam. They viewed the Cambodian invasion as an appalling expansion of a war that must be ended as soon as possible.

In June, the US Senate voted to repeal the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the now-infamous measure that Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon had used to send American military forces to fight in Vietnam without formally declaring war. Senators John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky and Frank Church of Idaho introduced an amendment to force an American withdrawal from Cambodia by the end of June. Their amendment didn't pass the House of Representatives, but they got what they wanted when Nixon ended American ground involvement in the operation on June 30. Later in the year, Congress passed an amendment forbidding American ground troops from fighting in Cambodia and Laos.

The Cambodian invasion did not have the desired effect on the North Vietnamese, either. They pulled their representatives from peace talks for the duration of the invasion and refused to reengage meaningfully until the US and South Vietnam withdrew. Nixon found that the only way he could appease public opinion was to announce in October the withdrawal of 100,000 more American troops in the coming year. This dampened the demonstrations and quieted the critics, but it hamstrung General Abrams even more.

By the end of 1970, Nixon had been president for almost two years, and instead of ending the war, he had succeeded only in continuing it and fostering more divisiveness at home. The Cambodian strategy had only poured fuel on the fire, and the communists still had not been dislodged.

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AMERICA PULLS BACK, THE NORTH STRIKES, 1971–1972

At the beginning of 1971, there were just under 335,000 American troops in Vietnam, down substantially from the peak of 543,000 two years earlier, and the numbers were declining daily. And by the end of the year, the American presence would more than halve to 140,000. Responsibility for defeating the communists was shifting to the shoulders of the Republic of Vietnam. And the conflict was devolving back into what it had largely always been: a civil war between competing versions of Vietnamese nationalism, between communist and non-communist visions, and between the north and south.

SOUTH VIETNAM'S STATUS

By 1971, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam was in better military shape than at any previous time in the war, and some inroads had been made into recapturing the countryside from the Viet Cong. But any immediate peace agreement was, at a minimum, still likely to favor the communists, or, with America completely out of the picture, to simply clear the way for northern forces to invade South Vietnam. The question was whether things had improved to a point where the Saigon government was strong enough to survive without a major American military presence.

President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu now faced a true dilemma. If South Vietnam was really going to fill the huge vacuum left by the departing Americans, then he was going to have to ask for greater sacrifices on the part of average South Vietnamese, testing their will to do whatever was necessary to win the war.

The president had no choice but to implement new policies that might prove unpopular with his people. He expanded the draft to include high school and university students, prompting significant protests and opposition. To pay for the costly war and the growing armed forces, he raised taxes.

On the upside, the Land-to-the-Tiller program had made great strides in meaningfully redistributing land and breaking the tenancy debt cycle in the south. But even the success of Thiệu's reforms did not quell a growing opposition to his war expansion policies, and he knew it.

Under the country's constitution, Thiệu had to stand for reelection in 1971. He brazenly masterminded the passage of new election laws that disqualified most of his likely opponents, and he ended up as the only candidate on the ballot. He won this rigged election with 94% of the vote, but the obvious fraud damaged his legitimacy domestically and internationally.

MACV'S ACTIVITIES

As the first weeks of 1971 unfolded, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam intelligence analysts noticed a major increase in troops and supplies moving down the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. General Creighton Abrams, the MACV commander, and South Vietnamese military leaders worried

that the communists were taking advantage of the ongoing American withdrawal by massing forces for a major offensive to conquer the northern portions of South Vietnam.

The Americans decided to launch an offensive into Laos, known as Lam Son 719, to achieve two objectives. First, they wanted to capture the town of Tchepone, a key North Vietnamese Army transshipment point located about 40 miles west of Khe Sanh on Route 9. Second, and more ambitiously, the allied planners hoped to permanently sever the Hồ Chí Minh trail. Finally, they would tackle the problem that had festered for a full decade since Soviet and American negotiators had consummated a Laotian neutrality agreement that, in effect, had ceded control over the Laotian-Vietnamese border areas to the communists.

DIFFICULTIES IN LAOS

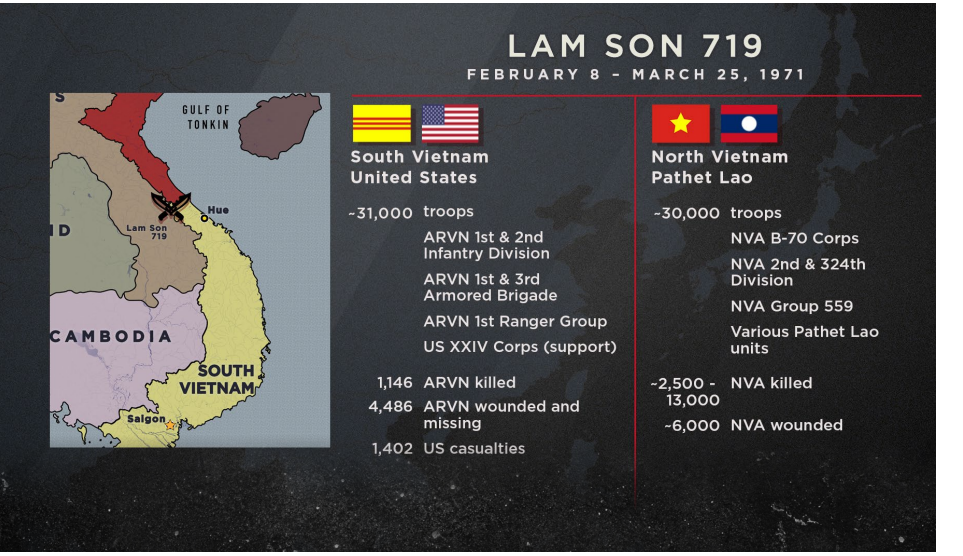
In early January, Congress had passed the Cooper-Church Amendment prohibiting the use of US ground troops in Laos. Therefore, all of the ground forces that participated in Lam Son 719 were South Vietnamese, and most observers thought of the operation as a major test of Vietnamization. Even so, American planes, helicopters, artillery, and logistical units did play a major role in supporting the South Vietnamese invasion.

Planners expected to face opposition from 10,000 rear guard NVA soldiers, 4,000 Pathet Lao communist guerrillas, and at most about 7,000 NVA combat troops. On February 8, 1971, in the wake of B-52 raids and an artillery barrage, 15,000 Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldiers crossed the border and began working their way west along Route 9.

Over a three-week period, the South Vietnamese advanced 12 miles into Laos, sparring with NVA formations much of the way. At the same time, a US Navy task force was operating off the coast of North Vietnam, maneuvering as if to launch an amphibious invasion. The North Vietnamese kept a wary eye on the task force and kept troops in place to ward off this potential invasion. But once Hanoi figured out that an invasion was not in the cards, they took steps to counter Lam Son 719.

Five NVA divisions, numbering about 40,000 combat soldiers, were sent into action against the ARVN. They were heavily armed. The operation turned into a bloody slog. Eventually, on March 9, Thiệu ordered South Vietnamese forces to withdraw from Laos, a tricky proposition given the difficult terrain and enemy forces harassing the retreating units.

On March 23, the last survivors retreated across the border. It is estimated that around half of the original force of 15,000 made it back home, and they were lucky to have gotten out.



AFTER LAM SON 719

In the aftermath, Washington and Saigon attempted to spin Lam Son 719 as a successful spoiling attack that had prevented the NVA from overrunning more territory. But in the United States, Lam Son 719's unhappy ending only hardened a growing antiwar consensus and a general disgust with the Saigon government.

An organization called Vietnam Veterans Against the War, or VVAW, convened in a Detroit hotel for a conference-style gathering they dubbed the Winter Soldier Investigation. Funded in part by benefit performances from Jane Fonda, Dick Gregory, David Crosby, and Graham Nash, the Winter Soldier Investigation recorded the testimonies of 109 veterans who claimed to have either heard about, participated in, or witnessed American atrocities in Vietnam.

Ultimately, Winter Soldier allegations almost entirely came down to individual soldier testimonies rather than any forensic evidence or corroboration on the ground. The army's Criminal Investigative Division and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service did find enough merit in some of the testimonies to officially investigate, but they were often hindered by the reluctance of these veterans to give sworn testimony.

In the end, very few claims could be corroborated. The Winter Soldier stories can neither be embraced nor completely dismissed by any fair-minded person.

GROWING OPPOSITION

Two months later, in April 1971, the VVAW staged a series of protests in prominent locations around Washington DC. They dubbed the demonstrations Operation Dewey Canyon III, a mocking reference to a similarly named pair of real operations that American military forces had fought along the Laotian-Vietnamese border.

Meanwhile, militant civilian opponents were also planning events in an attempt to force the government to stop the war. Beginning on May 1, between 25,000 and 40,000 protesters converged on Washington. Many, like David Dellinger and Rennie Davis, had been working for years to force an American withdrawal from Vietnam.

Instead of organizing yet another mass event, Dellinger, Davis, and other hardcore activists changed their tactics. They now focused their efforts on blocking intersections, erecting barriers, and stopping traffic as a means of paralyzing Washington and the government itself.

But the Nixon administration was ready for them. A force of 10,000 police and troops, including paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division and US Marines, converged on the various hot spots. Police arrested people in droves. Overall, the demonstration was a failure, though the administration's heavy-handed tactics did contribute to many Americans' increasingly sour view of the government's war policies.

MORALE FALTERS

By mid-1971, with withdrawals quickening and the end of the war in sight, morale and discipline among US active forces in Vietnam was starting to break down. With withdrawals speeding up, no one wanted to risk getting killed just months before they might be shipped out.

Making matters worse, drug use among US forces had reached epidemic proportions. Marijuana grows in the wild in Vietnam, and from the very beginning soldiers had no trouble obtaining it.

But as the war dragged on and morale declined, harder drugs began to proliferate, worst of all heroin and opium, which were far more dangerous and highly addictive. By mid-1971, surveys estimated 10% to 25% of enlisted men in Vietnam were using heroin. Sadly, few programs existed to help these individuals, and many would go back home with addiction problems.

All of this had a disastrous effect on troop morale. A very visceral demonstration of this was the dramatic rise in fragging. Fragging is the deliberate attempt to kill a fellow soldier or officer; during the Vietnam War, this was often achieved by using a fragmentation grenade. These incidents have always been hard to prove, but there were nearly 700 suspected or verified fragging incidents in 1970 and 1971.

THE PENTAGON PAPERS

In June 1971, morale at home and abroad took an even heavier hit. Four years earlier, in 1967, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had commissioned a secret study of US policy in Vietnam, possibly as a means of correcting the troubling course of the war. The study explored American involvement all the way back to 1945.

It consisted of 7,000 pages of classified documents from across the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the CIA, and other departments that revealed that, far too often, the government had lied or misled the American public and Congress about the war. One of the researchers, Daniel Ellsberg, had spent time on the ground in Vietnam and had become disillusioned with the war. He secretly photocopied much of the study. This material came to be known as the Pentagon Papers.

Ellsberg strongly believed that the American people had a right to see the Pentagon Papers, and he hoped that this disclosure might force the Nixon administration to end the war immediately. He provided the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with copies, and he urged the senators to make them public, but they declined. In the spring of 1971, he leaked the Pentagon Papers to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

Even though the Pentagon Papers indicted previous administrations and not Nixon's, the president did not want them to become public. The administration's resulting aggressive legal efforts to prevent the release

of the Pentagon Papers, in a series of cases that went all the way to the Supreme Court, created the popular perception that the government was attempting to squelch free speech, especially after the administration charged Ellsberg with violations of the 1917 Espionage Act.

Ellsberg fully admitted what he had done, and a grand jury did indict him on these charges, but the judge declared a mistrial after it was discovered that the government had illegally wiretapped Ellsberg and that Nixon administration operatives had broken into Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office to look for incriminating information. In the end, Nixon's lawyers also failed to persuade the Supreme Court to enjoin publication of the documents. The newspapers published serialized articles, and by the end of 1971, the Pentagon Papers also became available in book form, ironically from the US Government Printing Office.

RISING AGGRESSION

With the American military presence in Vietnam growing ever more unsustainable, Nixon now pinned his hopes on a diplomatic solution. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's most important aide, spent much of 1971 conducting secret talks with the North Vietnamese. But eventually the talks broke down over the disposition of the Thiệu government.

Nixon's diplomacy with China and the Soviet Union, though, was gaining traction, which worried the politburo and General Secretary Lê Duẩn. Lê Duẩn also had an eye on American domestic politics. Knowing that 1972 was an election year in the United States, he felt that the time had come to conquer South Vietnam through sheer force of arms to humiliate Nixon and either cost him the election or force him to abandon Thiệu.

Defense Minister Võ Nguyên Giáp was charged with overseeing the operation, known as Nguyễn Huệ after a general who had defeated Chinese forces in 1789. By this time, there were just 65,000 Americans left in Vietnam, only 6,000 of whom were combat soldiers. As of the spring of 1972, the ARVN had largely assumed responsibility for fighting the war, and this army was the primary communist target.

On March 30, just a few days before Easter, NVA troops and tanks crashed across the demilitarized zone, unleashing human wave attacks with heavy artillery support. In the weeks that followed, they crushed the ARVN 3rd Division, captured Quang Tri City, and overran much of I Corps. In the central highlands, they besieged Kontum, and in III Corps, An Loc. They took over several districts in Binh Dinh province, near the coast.

South Vietnam plunged into a state of violent chaos. But once the initial shock waves of the offensive passed, the NVA's momentum waned. ARVN troops, augmented by US advisors, fought fairly well. American airpower, including B-52 bomber strikes, proved to be a devastating weapon against identifiable NVA formations on the move. The same was true for naval gunfire.

A furious Nixon ordered a resumption of bombing of the north. For more than five months, in Operation Linebacker, American bombers hit North Vietnam's infrastructure, power grid, and air defenses, in addition to the Hồ Chí Minh Trail.

Public opinion largely supported Nixon's decision to bomb the north, and his approval ratings rose. Perhaps most significantly, Nixon for the first time ordered naval aircraft to mine Haiphong harbor, where Soviet ships docked to unload weapons and equipment. The mines stopped unloading operations in Haiphong for the rest of American involvement in the war.

The communist offensive had died out by the end of June. Aided by generous American air support, ARVN soldiers recaptured most of the lost territory, with the notable exception of several border areas as well as several key towns south of the demilitarized zone, particularly Dong Ha and the naval base at Cua Viet, which soon became new ports for the north.

The NVA lost half of its tanks and artillery. At least 40,000 North Vietnamese soldiers were killed over a period of three months, and 100,000 died by the end of the year.

The South Vietnamese lost more than 30,000 themselves, but the ARVN fought well enough to defeat the NVA. Lê Duẩn crassly blamed Giáp for the failure of the offensive and stripped him of control of the NVA.

The victory strengthened Thiệu and the Vietnamization policy, but it was not decisive for the allied side. As the fall of 1972 unfolded, the final chapter of the American war in Vietnam was about to begin.

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THE BITTER END, 1972–1975

In early August 1972, President Nixon sat down with the adviser and diplomat Henry Kissinger to discuss the secret peace talks underway with both the North and South Vietnamese. From Nixon's first moment in office, he had faced a nearly insoluble problem: How could he withdraw US forces and achieve peace in Vietnam without consigning the Saigon government to conquest by the communists?

THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION IN 1972

By mid-1972, Nixon was running out of options. American involvement had to end, and quickly. The US Senate had passed a resolution mandating the total withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam once the communists returned all American prisoners of war. And in three short months, Nixon would face the American electorate, to whom he'd promised "peace with honor" in 1968.

Meanwhile, in Saigon, President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and the South Vietnamese were terrified that the Americans might soon abandon them. In Hanoi, Lê Duẩn hoped that Nixon might be defeated in November in favor of a new president committed to negotiating a peace agreement at any price.

Additionally, the North Vietnamese still had worries of their own that Nixon might pull off a breakthrough with their Chinese and Soviet sponsors. Positive interactions between those countries and the United States had somewhat increased. The question now was whether they would be willing to cut North Vietnam loose to further ingratiate themselves with the Americans.

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

At the very same time, the presidential election campaign was unfolding in the United States. A crowded field of Democratic candidates reflected the divisions over the war that had convulsed the party since 1968. In the end, George McGovern, a senator from South Dakota, gained the Democratic Party's nomination. He'd flown 35 combat missions during World War II but was an unapologetic dove who fully embraced left-wing reforms, such as legalized abortion and dramatic expansion of welfare programs.

McGovern's association with hard left domestic policies and his zeal for peace at any price in Vietnam made it difficult for him to woo mainstream voters. By contrast, Nixon came across as a steady hand and sensible figure.

By late October, it appeared that Nixon was about to finalize a pact with the communists to end the war. Kissinger and his communist counterpart, Lê Đức Thọ, had met in Paris and hammered out the rough draft of an agreement.

Their understanding called for a cease-fire, followed 60 days later by a total US military withdrawal. North Vietnam would then return all American prisoners of war. North Vietnamese Army troops were to remain in place wherever they happened to be located in South Vietnam. A tripartite commission composed of Thiệu's officials, the Viet Cong, and neutral parties would later convene to determine the nature of the government in the south.

In late October, when the North Vietnamese leaked news of the impending deal, excitement surged in America. On election day, Nixon won a massive landslide victory. He gained nearly 61% of the popular vote and 520 electoral votes to only 17 for McGovern.

ELUSIVE PEACE

The president had little opportunity to savor his reelection victory. Peace was not truly at hand. President Thiệu refused to endorse the terms that Kissinger and Lê Đức Thọ had established. The North Vietnamese had also demanded the release of 30,000 Viet Cong suspects from Saigon's custody, undoing years of counterinsurgency efforts and potentially destabilizing South Vietnam, in exchange for release of the American prisoners of war.


HENRY KISSINGER

To the South Vietnamese president, the Kissinger-Thọ agreement amounted to a betrayal by the Americans, virtually guaranteeing the eventual collapse of the Saigon regime in the years to follow. He insisted on the adoption of 69 new amendments to the agreement before he would even think about reconsidering his position.

Eventually, Kissinger and Thọ resumed their talks. The North Vietnamese did not react well to the introduction of Thiệu's amendments. Thọ again demanded the release of the Viet Cong suspects. The two sides bickered unproductively, and the talks broke off on December 13.

MORE BOMBING

Through Kissinger, Nixon gave the North Vietnamese an ultimatum to resume talks by December 16 or suffer terrible consequences. They did not oblige.

Nixon responded by unleashing a massive 11-day bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Known as Operation Linebacker II, or more informally the Christmas bombings, the campaign targeted railroads, power plants, radar stations, docks, and shipyards in the Hanoi-to-Haiphong corridor. American planes also re-mined North Vietnamese ports.

The skies over North Vietnam bristled with accurate, radar-guided antiaircraft fire, surface-to-air missiles (or SAMs), and MiG fighters. On one mission alone, American aviators counted 56 SAM launches against a single formation of bombers.

Loss rates hovered around 6%, an unsustainable casualty rate that necessitated scaling back the number of bombers assigned to various missions. Crew morale was poor, in part because the fliers sensed that the end of the war was in sight and they had no desire to be among the last Americans killed or captured.

On the ground in North Vietnam, a population that had endured years of American raids during Operation Rolling Thunder now found themselves in the crosshairs once more. Both sides were hurting.

TALKS RESUME

Americans and the North Vietnamese agreed to resume talks in Paris, and Nixon ended Operation Linebacker II on December 29. In all, American planes dropped about 20,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam.

Contrary to communist and antiwar activist claims of indiscriminate carpet-bombing, civilian neighborhoods went largely unscathed. But North Vietnam's air defense network was in shambles, and the country's inventory of SAM missiles was exhausted. Harbors were shattered and transportation networks destroyed, leaving the country in a weakened state.

Northern leaders worried that the Americans might choose next to bomb the nation's network of paddy dikes and cause disastrous mass flooding. That influenced the politburo's willingness to resume the talks.

In America, the reaction to Linebacker II was strident. Editorials denounced the bombing as barbaric and unnecessary. Nixon's approval rating plummeted to 39%. And once Henry Kissinger and Lê Đức Thọ resumed their talks, the peace terms were essentially the same as those they had agreed to back in October.

A NEW AGREEMENT

The new agreement once again called for the US to withdraw its remaining military forces from Vietnam within 60 days after the communists returned all American prisoners of war. And NVA soldiers would remain in place in South Vietnam, albeit under a cease-fire order. The future of the Saigon government would remain unresolved.

As for President Thiệu, this time Nixon both cajoled and bullied him, assuring him that he would do everything in his power to continue US support for South Vietnam if North Vietnam attempted to conquer the south. When Thiệu remained intransigent, Nixon then simply threatened to revoke all support and leave South Vietnam on its own. At this point, Thiệu had little choice but to acquiesce to an agreement he despised.

A LINGERING THREAT

At last, on January 27, 1973, the Americans, the North Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese, and the Viet Cong signed the Paris Peace Accords. Within two months, the remaining 20,000 American military personnel left the country, and the communists released 591 prisoners of war who joyously returned to their families back in America.

The United States had lost more than 58,000 soldiers and had spent more than $150 billion to achieve this "peace with honor" outcome. Unfortunately, there was to be no lasting peace. Both Vietnams quickly violated the cease-fire provisions of the agreement, and the fighting resumed more or less unabated.

In March 1973, a politburo publication outlined two future scenarios for the unification of the country: political revolution or military victory. They acknowledged their preference for the former, wishing to avoid the Americans returning. But the latter was not even remotely ruled out.

As for South Vietnam, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam performed capably in a series of preemptive attacks in the central highlands and the Mekong delta. In October 1973, the communists tested the fences with a well-organized push in the partially captured Quang Duc province, but the ARVN held the line.

The problem the south now faced, though, was keeping their armed forces operating. Thanks to the United States, the ARVN was now one of the largest and best-equipped armed forces in the world. But South Vietnam did not have the sophisticated support infrastructure or economic strength needed to maintain it.

The south could not survive, then, without a significant and constant supply of American aid, which Nixon had to give if he wanted to stave off collapse. But by the start of 1974, the White House was becoming paralyzed by the Watergate crisis. Disgust with corruption at the highest levels of American government paralleled a growing weariness with foreign wars and all things Vietnam.

DECLINING SUPPORT

Over Nixon's veto, Congress had passed the War Powers Act, significantly reducing the power of the president to deploy troops in a combat zone. And from 1973 to 1974, over Nixon's objections, Congress cut aid to the Saigon government from $2 billion to $700 million. Nixon's eventual successor, Gerald Ford, did not have the political influence to persuade Congress to increase the aid.

The declining American support had a devastating effect on morale in South Vietnam. ARVN desertions in 1974 soared to nearly a quarter of a million. The South Vietnamese economy struggled, especially with unemployment, because it had been so dependent on the American military presence. Supply problems reached a crisis.


PRESIDENT GERALD FORD

By the fall of 1974, the balance of power had clearly shifted back to North Vietnam, especially after the Soviets and Chinese continued to supply their ally with new weaponry. The cessation of bombing raids against the Hồ Chí Minh trail also allowed the North Vietnamese, in direct contravention of the Paris Peace Accords, to reinforce the troops they already had in place in the south.

THE NORTH ATTACKS AGAIN

Emboldened by the declining American support for South Vietnam and the weakening of Saigon's military forces, the North Vietnamese launched a massive offensive on December 12, 1974. It began with an assault on Phuoc Long, just 75 miles northeast of Saigon, a provincial capital and major logistical hub.

Outnumbered and faced with shortages of men and supplies, and with roads to the town soon choked with refugees, Thiệu and the general staff opted to leave the town to its fate. The ARVN garrison made a valiant last-ditch defense but was overrun.

President Ford pleaded with Congress to step up aid and authorize American air strikes. However, politically, this was a nonstarter. In the end, the American State Department protested the violation of the accords but did little more. The South Vietnamese were now in deep trouble, and North Vietnam's leadership knew there was little standing in the way of an outright conquest.

THE END OF THE CONQUEST

The north's final push, led by General Văn Tiến Dũng, now began in earnest. On March 10, Dũng advanced toward Buon Ma Thuot, the largest city in the central highlands. Disastrously, ARVN command was fooled into believing the advance was a diversion and instead reinforced what they thought was the true objective at Pleiku.

Buon Ma Thuot fell rapidly, and the bulk of the army sitting at Pleiku and Kon Tum were now in danger of being cut off and surrounded. Thiệu and the general staff ordered the central highlands abandoned and for the ARVN to withdraw to the major cities of the coast to regroup.

But chaos had broken out. Terrified refugees were now fleeing the advancing communists, choking the roads. Military convoys and troops became entangled with the mass of civilians trying to escape. Viet Cong guerrillas blew up bridges and felled trees to slow down the exodus further, giving time for Dũng's NVA forces to catch up and assault the retreating columns.

NVA artillery and rockets mercilessly bombarded civilians and soldiers alike. Many ARVN units were surrounded completely and captured. Only 20,000 of the 60,000 retreating soldiers made it back to the coast. And it is estimated that of the 180,000 civilians who tried to flee to safety, only 60,000 got through.

After the unmitigated disaster in the central highlands, morale and discipline began to collapse, panic set in, and the south fell apart with astonishing speed. ARVN troops were now defecting en masse, fearing the worst if captured fighting for the enemy.

In Saigon, President Thiệu issued unrealistic and often contradictory orders, changing plans daily. Within weeks, Dũng's NVA forces had captured the critical northern cities Hue and Da Nang, and with them key military bases and huge caches of American-supplied military hardware.

Surprised and delighted at the speed of the collapse, the politburo, which had originally planned the final push for 1976, now ordered Dũng to throw caution to the wind and race as fast as he could to Saigon before the south had any chance to regroup and establish a new defensive line. The mission now was to capture the capital before May 19, Hồ Chí Minh's birthday.

Dũng began a lightning-paced charge for NVA forces nearly 400 miles south to Saigon. A valorous ARVN last stand at Xuan Loc, north of Saigon, could not hold them off, and by April 21, the NVA had encircled the capital.

That same day, President Thiệu resigned and fled the country. Anarchy now set in. Some ARVN commanders and their troops bravely attempted to mount a forlorn last-ditch defense, but many others simply abandoned their posts and fled.

Just after dawn on April 30, NVA forces entered downtown Saigon, with jubilant communist troops riding atop tanks. By 11:30 am, they had burst through the gates of the presidential palace. Bùi Quang Thận, a junior officer from a tiny fishing village in the north, hoisted the flag of the Viet Cong, and the remnants of the cabinet were taken into custody. South Vietnam now ceased to exist.

CONCLUDING CHAOS

Chaos engulfed the region. At harbors and airfields, desperate South Vietnamese frantically jockeyed for places aboard ships and planes to get them out. At the US embassy, crowds of people vied for a place aboard fleeing helicopters.

About 100,000 South Vietnamese got out of the country during these chaotic last days, mainly by boarding US naval vessels, but they were the lucky ones. Most were left behind. The shame and trauma of these horrible final moments in Vietnam have haunted generations of American policymakers ever since.

Thus, in the spring of 1975, after nearly 20 years of fighting, the communists finally succeeded in uniting Vietnam under their control. For them, it was a triumph. For America, this was a disastrous defeat such as the country had never had to reckon with before. The South Vietnamese had lost everything, and now they faced an uncertain fate under the new regime.

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VIETNAM'S CASUALTIES, PRISONERS, AND MIA

This lecture focuses on the Vietnam War's casualties, prisoners, and missing people. The war produced millions of stories of men and women who tragically suffered, but it also created stories of those who survived and heroic individuals who worked to save them.

FORTUNES OF A SOLDIER

When it came to casualties in Vietnam, the fortunes of a soldier were radically different depending on who they fought for. Among American soldiers, 81% of injured combatants survived, the best ratio in any American war up to that point. South Vietnam was a major beneficiary of American medical technology, supplies, and training, too, so Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldiers also had very good prospects of survival.

There were three main reasons for this high survivability rate. First, medical evacuation helicopters, known as medevacs or dustoffs, could get almost anywhere and transport wounded men to a hospital quickly. Throughout the war, dustoff crews flew 850,000 medical evacuation missions, saving an untold number of lives. Medevac pilots became legendary for their daring and courage.

The second reason why so many wounded men survived was the existence of first-rate, permanent medical facilities, such as those at Pleiku, Chu Lai, and Long Binh. The third factor in the high survivability rate was the availability of whole blood at American medical installations and sometimes even in the field. Modern weapons tend to inflict wounds with heavy blood loss, and the top cause of death in combat is bleeding out, so transfusions are a vital tool to stave off death and stabilize a patient.

A STAGGERING TOLL ★ THERE CAN NEVER BE A FULL OR ACCURATE ACCOUNTING OF THOSE WHO WERE KILLED, WOUNDED, OR TAKEN PRISONER DURING VIETNAM'S LONG STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE. BUT THE ROUGH NUMBERS ARE STAGGERING. ESTIMATES SUGGEST THE ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM LOST APPROXIMATELY 250,000 TROOPS, WITH MORE THAN 1 MILLION MORE WOUNDED. MORE THAN 58,000 AMERICANS WERE KILLED AND 150,000 WOUNDED. AS FOR NORTH VIETNAMESE AND VIET CONG CASUALTIES, MOST SOURCES FIGURE AROUND 1 MILLION PEOPLE GAVE THEIR LIFE TO FULFILL HỒ CHÍ MINH'S VISION, AND HALF A MILLION MORE WERE WOUNDED. PERHAPS HALF A MILLION CIVILIANS LOST THEIR LIVES IN THE STRUGGLE. HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS WENT MISSING IN ACTION. THOSE FIGURES DON'T EVEN INCLUDE THE DECADE THE VIET MINH SPENT FIGHTING THE JAPANESE AND FRENCH PRIOR TO THE CREATION OF SOUTH VIETNAM.

COMBAT MEDICS

American and Army of the Republic of Vietnam units also had combat medics who were embedded with units in the field. These were the first responders, and they were almost always called Doc by their soldier buddies. These brave men ate, slept, lived, fought, and all too often died with their assigned combat unit. Some had volunteered to be medics. Some were conscientious objectors who refused to take a life. Others were simply singled out after basic induction for further training, never quite knowing why.

Medics dispensed care to Vietnamese civilians and enemy prisoners of war (POWs) as well. A typical rifle company had one medic per platoon and a ranking company medic who operated with the company command group. Being a medic was very dangerous, as it required moving around during battle to treat wounded soldiers in perilous places.

Several thousand medics died or were wounded in action in Vietnam. They were also susceptible to burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder, the latter of which often centered around deep-seated guilt over the men they could not save. Medics who served in action were decorated with a special combat medic badge.

NORTH VIETNAMESE MEDICAL CARE

Technology, training, and supplies from the communist bloc and humanitarian organizations meant that North Vietnamese medical facilities were, in the right conditions, also capable of providing high standards of care. But the right conditions were rare.

Unlike the Americans and ARVN, nowhere that the communists operated, north or south, was truly safe from attack and bombings, and hospital facilities often had to be abandoned at a moment's notice. Some of the better-established hospitals operated across the borders at secret facilities in Cambodia and Laos. In the north, the rugged caves of Cat Ba Island were home to one of the largest cave-based hospital complexes, still visitable today, as the natural wonder of Halong Bay was largely safe from American bombing raids.

But most Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army personnel were fighting long distances from these facilities. And with no air support and very few vehicles at their disposal in the south, the vast majority of communist casualties had to be evacuated on foot or sometimes by river.

Field hospitals operated somewhat closer to the action, but these were often just makeshift affairs in caves, tunnels, or simple thatched buildings or tents. Field doctors could be operating without electricity, running water, or even adequate light if they were underground. It was a constant struggle to maintain a minimally sterile environment and to prevent infectious diseases from spreading. Medical supplies could be in short supply as well, owing to the communists' immense logistical challenges.

Inevitably, these challenges meant that casualties, even if they could be evacuated to receive medical care, often became fatalities. Yet, just like their American counterparts, NVA and VC medics were greatly admired by their comrades.

PRISONERS

Any communist soldier would likely have greatly preferred to take their chances in a VC field hospital rather than be taken prisoner by the South Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese government refused to recognize guerrillas as real soldiers who enjoyed the right to recognition as prisoners of war, since that might confer legitimacy on the insurgency.

Prisoners were treated as lawless brigands and simply herded into so-called communist rebel camps, where their captors attempted to reeducate them. The tactic was disturbingly similar to those employed by Chinese communists in their own reeducation camps; the irony of this seemed lost on South Vietnamese leaders.

We do not know precisely how many Viet Cong and NVA became prisoners throughout the war, but it would be safe to say tens of thousands and perhaps as many as 100,000. Because it was often difficult for the allies to determine who was a VC guerrilla, or even who was an NVA soldier, the classification of POWs was nebulous. Many South Vietnamese civilians were detained as VC suspects and quickly released. Others remained in custody for days, months, or even years. Treatment of POWs in the south varied widely, from appropriate to abysmal.

WELCOME DEFECTORS ★ MANY PEOPLE WHO ENDED UP IN SAIGON'S CUSTODY WERE NOT PRISONERS BUT DEFECTORS. IN 1963, THE NGÔ ĐÌNH DIỆM REGIME INSTITUTED THE CHIEU HOI, OR OPEN ARMS, AMNESTY PROGRAM WITH AMERICAN SUPPORT. THE IDEA OF GRANTING A CLEAN SLATE AMNESTY TO GUERRILLAS WAS WELL ESTABLISHED IN COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE AND HAD PREVIOUSLY HELPED UNDERMINE INSURGENCIES IN THE PHILIPPINES AND MALAYA.

BETWEEN 1963 AND 1973, NEARLY 160,000 PEOPLE DEFECTED THROUGH THE CHIEU HOI PROGRAM. NEARLY ALL OF THESE DEFECTIONS CAME FROM THE VIET CONG RATHER THAN THE MORE RIGOROUSLY TRAINED AND DISCIPLINED NVA. THERE WERE ISSUES OF CORRUPTION IN THE PROGRAM AND RESENTMENT FROM ARVN SOLDIERS TOWARD THE DEFECTORS. BY AND LARGE, THOUGH, THE PROGRAM WAS A SUCCESS.

PRISONERS OF THE NORTH

South Vietnamese soldiers who were captured by the VC or the NVA had uniformly bleak prospects. Almost all of those who were taken prisoner by the VC rotted away in small, remote jungle camps in the rugged areas on either side of the Cambodian or Laotian borders.

The vast majority of ARVN POWs—several hundred thousand in total—were taken by NVA units in the last years of the war amidst the chaotic collapse of South Vietnam. Eventually, there were hundreds of camps in operation. At first they were only in the north, but after the fall of Saigon, camps began operating in the south as well. Conditions were generally poor. Prisoners subsisted on just enough food to ward off starvation, if not always malnutrition. They were put to work in backbreaking jobs and lived in crude, rickety accommodations.

The purpose of the camps was not just to punish the prisoners. It was to reeducate the former ARVN soldiers, who spent hours in classes receiving instruction on how to live as good communists in the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Some spent just weeks or months in a reeducation camp before the authorities deemed them to be sufficiently transformed to return home. Others—especially ARVN officers and former government officials—languished for many years.

For instance, Tran Ngoc "Harry" Hue, a distinguished colonel, spent almost 12 years in reeducation camps. Once he was released, his new life in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was anything but happy. As was typical for many other former ARVN soldiers, he endured poverty and a kind of societal ostracism. Hue emigrated to the United States in 1991 and became an American citizen six years later.

AMERICAN POWS

Over the course of the war, approximately 766 American military personnel became prisoners. The vast majority were aviators, many of whom were shot down over North Vietnam during the Rolling Thunder campaign. Perhaps two or three dozen ground troops were captured.

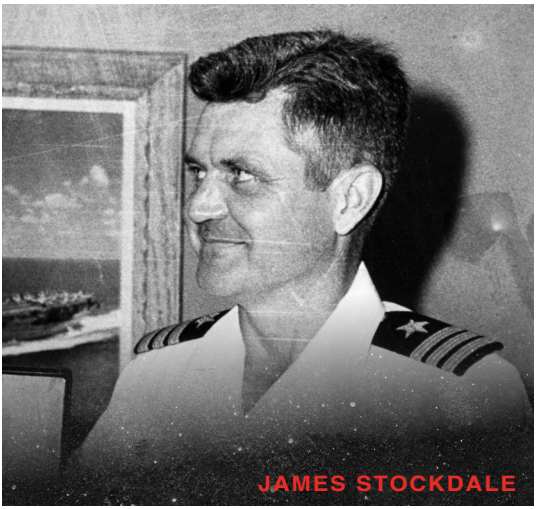
For most of the war, American POWs were spread among about a dozen camps in and around the Hanoi area, the most famous of which was Hoa Lo, better known as the Hanoi Hilton. Given that neither the US nor North Vietnam had officially declared war on each other, the communists asserted that the Americans they captured were not worthy of recognition as prisoners of war. This was an excuse to mistreat the prisoners.

Many of the aviator POWs had successfully completed Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) school, an intense training course that taught students how to evade capture and survive in the wilderness. SERE also schooled them on enduring enemy captivity. But even this kind of training could not prepare prisoners for the realities of incarceration in North Vietnam.

American POWs endured intensive interrogation, isolation, torture, humiliation, degradation, and inadequate food and medical care. Under such conditions, more than 100 American captives perished in North Vietnamese custody.

Psychological torture was routinely applied by the communists to induce American POWs into signing a document or making a public statement admitting to their guilt as war criminals and denouncing the American presence in Vietnam. Occasionally, the communists even offered to set a prisoner free in exchange for this kind of statement.

American POWs attempted to adhere to an established code of conduct to uphold the chain of command, refuse information, and resist the enemy as much as possible. But amidst protracted torture and mistreatment, few could maintain the code at all times.



The Americans Lieutenant Colonel Robinson Risner, Lieutenant Commander Jeremiah Denton, and Commander James Stockdale stand out as examples of ingenuity and resilience. Risner endured three years of solitary confinement but managed to keep up the morale and discipline of many fellow POWs by employing an ingenious code that the prisoners had devised to converse with one another via tapping out letters on their prison walls.

When the North Vietnamese forced Denton to submit to a farcical, stage-managed press conference in 1966, he risked his life to blink the word *torture* in Morse code, confirming US government suspicions of how poorly the communists were treating the POWs. Stockdale was the most senior naval officer among the prisoners. He was so committed to the code that he inflicted a near-mortal wound on himself to demonstrate his resolve to the North Vietnamese. He endured years of torture, degradation, and mistreatment, and he did it with extraordinary courage, eventually receiving the Medal of Honor.

AMERICANS, RETURNED AND MISSING

With American withdrawal in early 1973, the North Vietnamese repatriated 591 prisoners, among them Captain Floyd James Thompson, a Special Forces soldier whose plane was shot down in March 1964. He had been a POW for almost nine years, the longest of any American. They were flown back to the United States amid great fanfare in an operation called Homecoming.

Even as the many POWs returned to the United States and moved on with their lives, around 1,600 Americans are still listed as missing in action (MIA) somewhere in Southeast Asia. This is a cruel fate: Family members are left with no closure and many vexing questions about what really happened to their loved ones, or even if they might still be alive.

During the peace negotiations in 1973, the US indicated a willingness to provide about $2.5 billion of aid to repair war damage in North Vietnam in exchange for the return of all POWs. Yet after Operation Homecoming, rumors flew that the north had not really given back all the prisoners, and that some MIAs remained in captivity.

Meanwhile, the Nixon administration was facing a hard enough time convincing Congress to continue aiding South Vietnam, much less to cough up taxpayer funds for former communist enemies in the north. The administration found in the MIA issue a convenient reason to avoid having to pay.

This refusal only stoked the rumors of communist treachery and POW abandonment. The MIA issue became the greatest sticking point in the normalization of relations between the US and the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Dozens of subsequent government and media inquiries failed to produce conclusive evidence that MIAs were still alive and in custody. Yet many Americans distrusted the official accounts. A 1991 poll revealed that 69% of Americans believed that Vietnam was still holding American POWs.

A somber black POW/MIA flag—now iconic—soon came into popularity and was even flown over government buildings. Conspiracy theories abounded, and popular movies like *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* only fed into the mythology of the lost POWs.

The salience of the issue has diminished somewhat in recent decades, particularly as DNA testing and improved relations have led to slow but steady identification of more MIAs. To date, no incontrovertible evidence has ever emerged of a live POW left behind in Vietnam. This doesn't mean that none existed, though, and it's unlikely the issue will ever be resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

THE VIETNAMESE MISSING

Almost 300,000 Vietnamese, northern and southern, remain missing to this day—a devastating situation in a country that cherishes ancestor worship. Some were ARVN soldiers, some were VC or NVA, and some were civilians.

The challenge of tracking down missing NVA and VC soldiers has been particularly hard, as they were not issued dog tags and rarely carried identification, while the brutal weapons of modern war could easily render a corpse unrecognizable. The impoverished postwar government had little money to invest in tracing their missing dead, but in recent decades a more prosperous country has returned to the task.

As of now, though, only a few thousand MIAs have been subsequently accounted for by the Vietnamese government. Many of the rest will certainly remain forever lost, leaving a tragic, permanent void for their families to endure.

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VIETNAM BECOMES A COUNTRY, NOT JUST A WAR

Returning veterans from Vietnam sometimes faced a rude welcome. For instance, a woman spat on the newly returned Captain Roland Merson, and a man called the veteran Al Watson a "baby killer." Merson and Watson were not alone. Though many, or maybe even most, did not experience traumatic incidents like these, America's Vietnam veterans were hardly welcomed with open arms.

A NATIONAL TRAUMA

The Vietnam War had become a national trauma for the United States. Many Americans coped by simply trying to forget the war by erasing its veterans from view or by blaming them for all that had gone wrong. In a

1973 Harris poll, respondents ranked military members very low in public esteem. Some veterans' associations even refused to accept returnees from Vietnam as members.

The media of the 1970s invariably portrayed Vietnam veterans as maladjusted, damaged, almost alien figures, claiming high rates of homelessness, unemployment, suicide, crime, and alcoholism. Popular movies like *Taxi Driver*, *The Deer Hunter*, and even the *Rambo* series only reinforced this distorted image.

Not surprisingly, employers who bought into these notions shied away from hiring veterans. This became so common that the federal government passed the Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act to protect veterans from discrimination in hiring, bank loans, and the like.

CHANGING VIEWS

Feeling isolated and alienated from their fellow Americans, tens of thousands of veterans simply hid or suppressed their involvement with the war. Only in the 1980s, after passions over the war had cooled and public esteem had risen for the military, did Vietnam veterans begin to receive well-deserved respect and appreciation.

The image of the troubled veteran began to be debunked. Numerous studies revealed lower rates of unemployment, suicide, and crime and higher rates of home ownership, education, and income for Vietnam veterans than their nonveteran peers.

THE NOVEMBER 1982 DEDICATION OF THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL IN WASHINGTON DC SIGNALED THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ERA OF SOCIETAL RESPECT AND GRATITUDE FOR THOSE WHO FOUGHT THE VIETNAM WAR. MORE THAN 150,000 VETERANS CONVERGED ON DC TO COMMEMORATE THE SOMBER WALL, WHICH IS ENGRAVED WITH THE NAMES OF MORE THAN 58,000 OF THEIR DECEASED COMRADES.

As the war grew more distant and the veterans aged, more of them began to talk and write about their experiences. They formed vibrant veterans' associations and assumed leadership roles in longer-standing organizations, some of which had once ostracized them. When American soldiers deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq, and other hot spots in the 21st century, Vietnam veterans generally took the lead in deployment support and welcome-home efforts.

THE SITUATION IN VIETNAM

The American veterans at least had a country where they could return. After the fall of Saigon, thousands of South Vietnamese desperately wanted to leave the land they had lost the war for. The first wave of 130,000 made it out during the chaotic spring days that followed the collapse of the Saigon government.

This group largely consisted of those who had worked closely with the Americans or South Vietnamese regime. Most were evacuated through Operation New Life, first to temporary holding camps on Guam, then on to the US for resettlement.

The triumphant communists executed some of those who did not escape. More commonly, former Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldiers, government officials, and other so-called class enemies were consigned to reeducation camps with poor conditions. This was soon to become the fate of hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese.

In the meantime, Lê Duẩn's new national communist government attempted to rebuild the war-shattered nation. Private property was abolished, at least theoretically, and the south was forcibly transitioned from capitalism to centralized planning. But the south's Western-oriented economy, already in recession after the Americans began withdrawing troops and investment, went into a tailspin when most of its export markets were cut.

To make matters worse, the communists created so-called New Economic Zones, a program that essentially allowed hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese to migrate south, displace southerners from their homes, and force them to reclaim or develop mountainous or jungle-covered areas. Hundreds of thousands of city dwellers were forced to leave their homes and toil in the countryside. To add insult to injury, the government often confiscated the property of these uprooted southerners.

The government also implemented agricultural collectivization. These heavy-handed policies disincentivized the production of food. Agricultural production declined in Vietnam. Famine nagged at some parts of the country.

REFUGEES

Unsurprisingly, many soon desperately wanted out from under communism, and so began one of greatest diasporas in modern history. From 1975 to 1995, a staggering 3 million people left Southeast Asia. Most were Vietnamese, but some were Cambodians and Laotians fleeing their own repressive communist governments. About 20% of the Vietnamese population left.

Some fortunate people managed to make their way on foot to Thailand or China, but the vast majority tried to escape by sea. Under sometimes unimaginable conditions and aboard less-than-seaworthy craft, they desperately attempted to get to the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and nearly anywhere else beyond the reach of communist Vietnam.

By one UN estimate, at least 200,000, and perhaps double that, died at sea, usually by drowning when their overcrowded vessels sank. Others were robbed, raped, or enslaved by seaborne pirates from around the Pacific Rim. And some refugees who were apprehended by Vietnamese authorities preferred to die at sea rather than return to their home country.

The unfolding humanitarian catastrophe prompted the UN to convene an international conference in Geneva in July 1979. The Vietnamese agreed to implement the so-called Orderly Departure Program. Though the communist government still tried to prevent emigration, if people paid enough or were nominated by a foreign government for resettlement, officials would facilitate their exit safely. Western countries agreed to accelerate the resettlement of as many refugees as possible.

Vietnamese expatriates ended up all over the globe, with the largest communities settling in Japan, France, Australia, Canada, and the United States, where between 500,000 and 1 million Vietnamese would eventually migrate. Over time, they made new lives for themselves.

CHAOS CONTINUES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The refugees were fleeing not just the oppression of communism but also continued turmoil and warfare in Southeast Asia. Just two weeks before the fall of Saigon, Phnom Penh had fallen to the Khmer Rouge insurgency, and now Pol Pot's radical, intensely anti-Western regime sought to introduce in Cambodia a new brand of pure agricultural communism. They forcibly evacuated the cities, put people in labor camps, and executed hundreds of thousands.

Many starved or were worked to death in these terrible collectives. By 1979, about one-quarter of the population, almost 1.7 million people, had been killed or died as a result. Predictably, thousands of Cambodian refugees fled to Thailand and Vietnam.

Prompted by the genocide, plus a series of border clashes, Vietnam invaded Cambodia at the end of 1978 and installed a pro-Vietnamese regime. The remnants of the Khmer Rouge fled to the countryside and fought a guerrilla war that lasted until the end of the century.

The Chinese had sponsored the Khmer Rouge, so they were none too pleased with the Vietnamese invasion. Vietnam now turned to the Soviet Union as its protector, and the Soviet Union in turn saw Vietnam as a counterweight to Chinese influence in the region.

The Soviets and Vietnamese signed a mutual defense pact in November 1978. Fed up with Vietnamese provocations, China invaded North Vietnam four months later in February 1979. The Soviets stayed out of the matter. After reaching a bloody stalemate, both sides claimed victory. In truth, neither accomplished anything except to poison their relations.

ECONOMIC TROUBLES

By the time Lê Duẩn died in 1986, the country he had fought so long to unite was in a decrepit economic condition. Inflation in Vietnam was running between 300% and 500% annually. Per capita income was just $200 to $300 a year. Vietnam's gross domestic product had experienced virtually no long-term growth since reunification. Consumer goods were scarce. Most likely, only Soviet aid—$2.5 billion a year—had prevented a total collapse.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam was essentially a failed state on the verge of an economic catastrophe, and many in the government knew that they could not continue on the same stolid Marxist-Leninist path. At the Community Party of Vietnam's Sixth National Congress in December 1986, a dramatic economic reform package designed to transition Vietnam toward more market-based, capitalist policies was introduced. The popular term for the reforms in Vietnam was *Đổi Mới*, which generally means "renovation" or "innovation."

The regime tried to save face by calling the new system a socialist-oriented market economy. In truth, they were transitioning to a capitalist economy, but with the continuation of authoritarian one-party rule, remarkably similar to what was happening at the same time in China. Trường Chinh, whom Lê Duẩn had helped push out as leader of the party in 1956, returned to the leadership to spearhead these reforms 30 years later.

RELATIONS BETWEEN AMERICA AND VIETNAM

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush began to warm the discourse with Vietnam, establishing a US consulate in Vietnam, ending the trade embargo, and working to resolve ongoing MIA issues. Bush's successor, Bill Clinton, diplomatically recognized the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1995 and exchanged ambassadors.

The thawing of relations between these old adversaries opened the way for major foreign investment and serious growth in the Vietnamese economy. In the wake of the Đổi Mới renaissance, GDP had more than quadrupled.

HEALING

With the rebuilding of trade and foreign relations in Vietnam came the slow healing of those who had fought there. Retired lieutenant general Hal Moore and former Vietnam war correspondent Joe Galloway visited the country many times during the 1990s to mend old wounds and explore the Ia Drang battlefield where they had fought in November 1965. Over the years, they met with and befriended many old enemies, including General Võ Nguyên Giáp and Lieutenant General Nguyễn Hữu An, who had commanded a battalion against Moore's outfit in the Ia Drang battle.

The two Americans were amazed to witness the Vietnamese resurgence firsthand. During their first visit in 1990, Hanoi had been a veritable ghost town. Just a few years later, it was starting to thrive. Many thousands of American veterans visited the country in succeeding decades and were generally welcomed warmly, even by their former bitter enemies.

The openness and market reforms eventually paid big dividends. In the 21st century, Vietnam's economy witnessed a remarkable sevenfold increase. Unemployment and inflation fell dramatically, and per capita income rose from a few hundred dollars a year to several thousand dollars.

Seemingly overnight, high-rise buildings and new developments sprung up in Vietnam's urban areas, especially Hồ Chí Minh City—the former Saigon—which remained the economic colossus that drove much of the economy. Agriculture modernized, and resorts opened on Vietnam's many beautiful beaches. Cities teemed with nightlife, traffic, new construction, music, and industry.

The population swelled to more than 97 million, the majority of whom have been born since the end of the war. About one-third of Vietnamese now lived in urban areas. By 2017, more than 10 million tourists, including more than 600,000 Americans, were visiting the country each year.

CONCLUSION

For the United States, the Vietnam War triggered a crisis of confidence in American foreign and military policy that has never truly abated. Many have termed this *Vietnam syndrome*, and ever since, nearly any American military foray has been compared with that war, from 1980s operations in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras to 21st-century wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Furthermore, the American armed forces changed dramatically because of Vietnam. A troubling decline in morale, readiness, proficiency, and public respect led to major reforms and the advent of an all-volunteer military that continues today. Vietnam veterans who stayed in uniform were determined to make sure that the armed forces would be highly prepared in the future. The obvious quality of the all-volunteer military is a direct legacy of Vietnam-inspired reforms.

Some commentators in the aftermath of Vietnam have maintained the idea that unpatriotic protestors and cowardly politicians lost a war the American military could have won. But the reality is that wars are never solely military questions. Ultimately, they come down to struggles of

human and political will, and they always will. If there was a limit to the North Vietnamese forces' endurance, American and its allies were unable to find it.

Tragic though it was, Vietnam functioned as something of a steam valve for serious Cold War tensions, with the various superpowers opting for a limited war rather than a global one. One can only imagine what might have resulted had America, China, or the Soviet Union, all nuclear powers by the 1960s, adopted a win-at-any-cost attitude in Vietnam.

The worst fears of communist repression and suffering that came to pass in the early decades of the new socialist republic ultimately gave way to a free enterprise system in the long run. Vietnamese cities today are thronged by American tourists, products, music, movies, and businesses.

A friendship of sorts has developed between the Vietnamese and American peoples. Incredibly, a 2017 Pew Research poll found 84% of Vietnamese had a favorable view of the United States, a much higher proportion than was found in even long-term American allies like the United Kingdom.

And as of the 2020s, a mutual fear of Chinese expansionism in Southeast Asia has brought the US and Vietnam closer than ever, to the point where we might even consider them allies. The US lost the war, but it seemingly won the peace.

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